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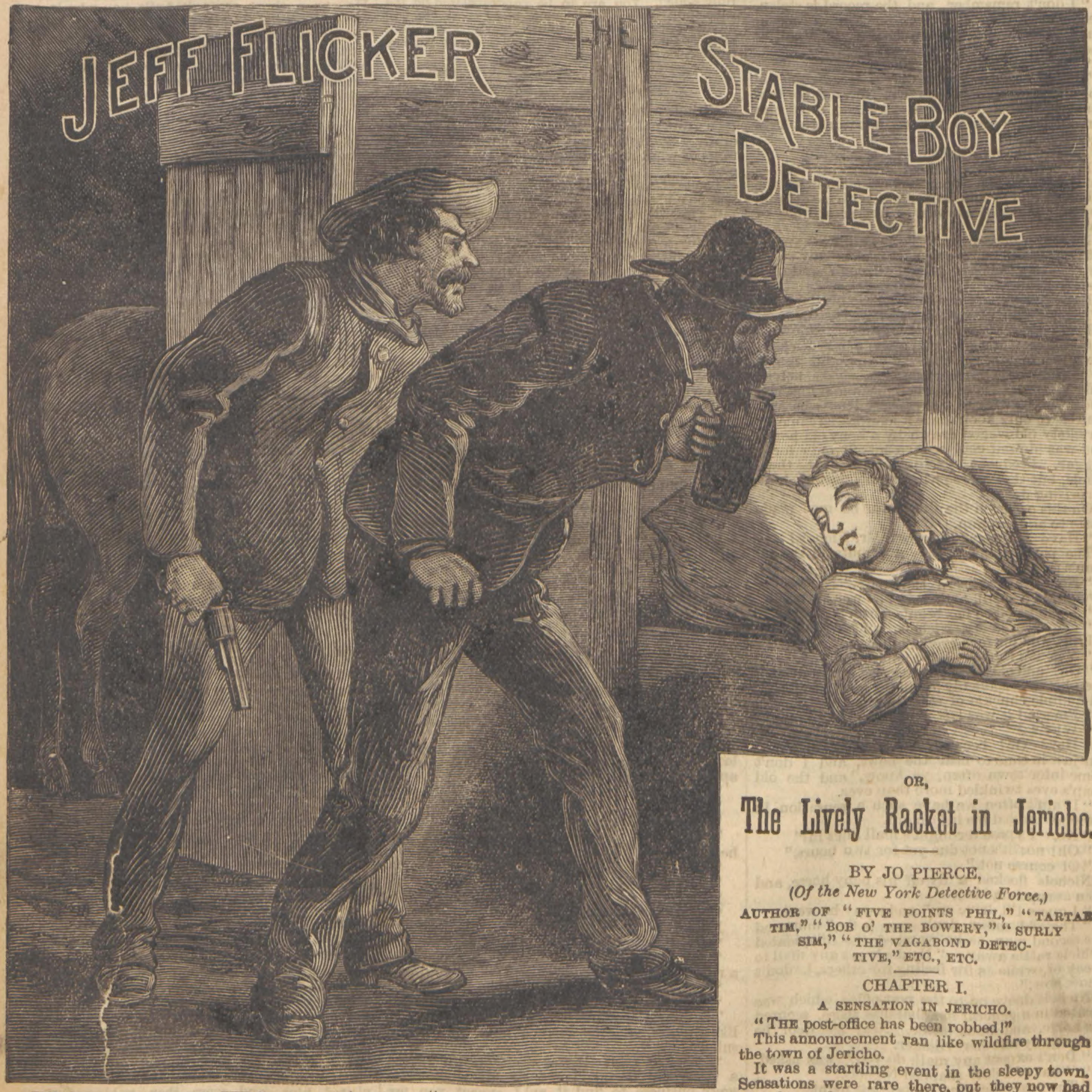
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THE TWO MEN ENTERED THE STABLE BOY'S ROOM. "HE IS STILL ASLEEP," OBSERVED
ONE, FLASHING THE LIGHT ON THE APPARENTLY SLEEPING JEFF.

Bold thieves had entered the Government building and taken away whatever was valuable, and left no clew to their identity.

The whole affair was a profound mystery.

Crime was a thing almost unheard of in Jericho, and it was thought that no one in the place was capable of such a misdemeanor; so when the constable, Elihu Fitch, announced that it was undoubtedly the work of experienced "cracksmen," all were ready to believe him.

This only made the matter more mysterious, however.

The question naturally arose—"What was there in the Jericho post-office to tempt professional thieves?"

Perkin Knott, the postmaster, stated that there had been only a trifle over thirteen dollars in the cash-drawer, besides stamps, and the latter had not been disturbed. That professional thieves could be tempted by thirteen dollars to make a journey to Jericho—which would cost more than that sum—did not seem likely.

Constable Fitch asked another question:

"Were there any valuable letters in the office?"

And the postmaster answered:

"There were two registered letters in the cash-box, I believe."

"Who for?"

"I don't remember, and the record is stolen. Seems to me one letter was for Abram Nelson, but I put up the mail in a hurry last night, as the stage came half an hour late."

"I'll see Nelson."

The constable did so at once. Mr. Nelson did not know anything about the letter, but the fact that his brother in another town had owed him ten dollars led him to believe that it might have been sent.

This was no new light.

Fitch, however, remained firm in his belief—old hands at the business had committed the robbery, and it had been done with a definite object. This object was to get something of value.

He sent a messenger to Tulip Center, the nearest railroad town, to get a record of any registered letters that had passed through, and then resumed work.

He was very anxious to solve the mystery.

Toward night something new was learned.

From the settlement of Joggle Meadow, a sub-village of Jericho, came one Peter Nichols. He was a man of about sixty years, and known to be rich for a farmer, but his riches helped only himself. He was called mean and miserly, and when he rode to the main village—he was seen there only about once a month—he came in a rickety old wagon drawn by a bony old horse, and was himself clad in garments fit only for a beggar. Frequent mending had kept them whole, but they were patched and darned to a surprising degree.

On this occasion the first man he met made haste to address him.

"Have you heard the news, Mr. Nichols?"

The polite address was a tribute to the old man's money.

"No, I ain't heerd the news," Nichols answered, in a shrill, high voice, as was his habit.

"The post-office has been robbed."

"Hey!" cried Mr. Nichols, his jaw suddenly falling, and his face growing grave.

"Yes, it's robbed—last night!"

"Oh!" and old Nichols meditated for a moment; then his eyes suddenly twinkled and he uttered an audible chuckle of satisfaction.

"I'm glad it was last night."

"Why so?"

"Hey? Oh! because, because. You see, I am just in time to hear the news, and I don't come inter town often, ye know," and the old chap's eyes twinkled more than ever.

"It ain't often we have such a sensation in Jericho," added his informant.

"No. I s'pose ter-night's mail ain't in?"

"Oh! no; it's not due yet for two hours."

"Of course not."

Nichols flocked a fly off his bony horse, and then abruptly added:

"I guess I'll drive on," and away he went.

"The old miser don't care a fig," muttered the second man, as he watched the dilapidated vehicle rattle away. "He don't get any mail to speak of, while as for feeling for others, he don't know how."

Nichols drove on to the post-office, which was located in a general merchandise store, secured his horse, and went inside. Near the door he was met by another villager.

"Don't expect any mail, do you?" was asked.

"What ef I do?" snapped Nichols.

"The post-office was robbed last night."

"What of it?" was the surly reply.

This was a speech natural to him, but very injudicious at that particular time. People were so stirred up by the robbery that any one who was curt and indifferent at that time could make enemies on all hands. Nichols's unpopularity increased accordingly.

"Let the old miser alone," said an angry voice. "He never was known to have human feeling for any one. Don't he begrudge his adopted girl the food she eats?"

There was a chorus of coinciding remarks, but Nichols paid no visible attention to them. He proceeded to purchase several articles of Perkin Knott, and after objecting to the price of everything, finally ended his business.

"I think there is a letter in the office for you, Nichols," Knott then said, and the postmaster went into the corner devoted to the office, and handed out the letter. Nichols's eyes were still keen, and as he glanced at the envelope a singular expression passed over his face. He went apart and, tearing the letter open, read it quickly.

It was as follows:

CHICAGO, JULY 28, 1885.

DEAR SIR:—According to your instructions by telegraph, we send your package one day earlier than at first arranged—by the same mail as this letter. It is registered and, as you requested, carefully sealed. You are to be congratulated on the successful issue of this work, and I think you will admit that we have done our work in excellent shape. Due care on your part will prevent further trouble.

Respectfully yours,

MARKIN & TOOHEY,

Attorneys-at-Law.

Nichols read to the end, and as he went on his face grew pale and startled. The letter was literally a bombshell, and he knew the full indications of what it contained better than any one else.

The postmaster was passing at that moment, and he addressed him:

"Ain't there any more mail fur me?"

"That's all."

"No—a—registered letter?"

The postmaster stopped short.

"Did you expect one?" he asked gravely.

"This letter says thar should be one."

"Where from?"

Nichols hesitated a moment.

"That don't make any difference," he finally answered.

"If it came last night, it's lost, I'm afraid. There were two registered letters stole. I ain't sure who they were for, for I didn't take down the address, and the papers are all stolen, too."

"Ain't it your business to take 'em down?"

"Yes; but I forgot it."

"You're a pretty man!" cried Nichols, in his shrillest voice. "My letter is gone, and you don't know anything about it. I must have it back!"

"Was there money in it?"

"That's my business."

"You needn't be so mighty sharp about it," angrily replied Knott.

"I'll have that letter, or make you smart for it!" declared Nichols, excitedly.

"You can do what you please about it, but you can't bully me in my own store. You stop your noise, or I'll throw you out of the door!"

This was a kind of argument which Peter Nichols could easily understand, and he suddenly abandoned his previous line of talk. Perhaps he forgot all about the postmaster, for he stood with the letter from Markin & Toohey clasped in a hand which trembled violently.

The news soon spread that the old miner had lost a registered letter, and Fitch, the constable, appeared on the scene.

"What's this I hear, Nichols?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the mechanical reply.

"You've lost a registered letter, eh?"

The old man's eyes suddenly brightened, and he looked sharply at Fitch.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Money in it?"

"No."

"What was it, then?"

Nichols hesitated a moment.

"I don't know," he then replied.

"Ain't you got a letter there telling you that a registered letter has been sent?"

"Yes."

"Then, of course, you know what was in it." The constable spoke sharply, for he did not like Nichols, and the latter's face again grew sullen.

"What ef I do? It was my letter, an' I have a right ter do as I see fit about it. 'Tis your business to find it, an' I expect you ter do it!"

Fitch gazed at the speaker in angry surprise.

"Why, you old miser! what do you mean by that?"

"Jest what I say!"

"I don't think I shall try very hard to help an old ruffian like you. You don't know enough to use anybody decent."

"That's all very well," shrilly returned Nichols, "but it's your duty ter find that letter, an' you've got ter do it! I want it back unopened!"

"What's in it that you're so afraid of?"

"That's my business."

"Don't you waste talk on the old crank, Fitch," advised a villager. "He don't deserve help from anybody; he's too mean to use anybody decent, and if I was you I'd let him and his old letter go."

"I'll have the law o' you ef you don't do yer duty!" snarled Nichols.

At that moment a new-comer pushed to the front, and in a quiet voice announced.

"I reckon I can throw a bit of light on this case!"

CHAPTER II.

JEFF FLICKER.

EVERYBODY turned toward the last speaker. He was a short, strongly-built boy who looked to be about fourteen years old, but was, really, two years older.

He was a resident of Jericho, but had been so only a year. Before that he had lived in a neighboring town, but when his only surviving friend died he had come to Jericho and gone to work in Andrew Payson's livery-stable.

Jericho prided itself on being a semi-fashionable town, and as the boy was one of the few who could not afford to dress well, and had no friends, he had been rather looked down upon by all.

He was a bright faced, black-eyed lad, who looked quite able to take care of himself, and, indeed, his battles with the world had made him older in experience and wisdom than pampered children of his actual age.

"Hallo!" cried the constable, "here is Jeff Flicker!"

"Jeff Flicker," by the way, was a sobriquet given the boy with presumed humor. Few persons in Jericho knew what his real name was.

"So you can tell us something of interest?"

"I think I can. Two men put up a horse at the stable last night, and I believe they're the ones that did the job."

"Did you know the men—ever see them before?"

"No. They said they had driven forty miles that day, but I know they lied, for I recognized the horse; it belongs in Tulip Center."

The latter place was the nearest railroad station.

"Why do you think they are the ones who robbed the post-office?"

"They put up their horse at nine o'clock, saying that they would stop in town, but woke me at one o'clock, took their team and drove off."

This was suggestive and suspicious, but it did not amount to proof, and the constable said as much.

"There is more to tell," replied Jeff, with a confident air. "The men wore disguises."

"How do you know?"

"I tumbled to it first when I saw one of them fixing his red wig on the sly. I knew it was a wig, as soon as I saw his motions, and then I looked them over carefully. I could almost swear that both of them were 'made up.'"

"That looks more important," agreed the officer, stroking his beard.

"But it don't show that they had any part in the post-office robbery," demurred a man standing by.

"Better wait until the evidence is all in!" retorted the youth, "before you put in your opinion."

"Oh! is there more? Well, out with it!"

"I heard them mention Nichols, and speak about some post-office."

"You heard this?" cried Nichols.

"Yes; I just did."

"Then why didn't you put a stop to their work?" the miser angrily demanded.

"I didn't know anything was wrong. It was when they took the horse away, and I heard nothing at all that was important; it was only a word now and then. I can't say whether the post-office they mentioned was the one at Jericho, nor did I hear what they had to say about it. As for Nichols, they were laughing about him, and I got the idea that they had visited him, and were then poking fun at him."

"But what did they say?" Nichols asked.

"The only sentence that I caught was that you had been badly sold, and 'wouldn't make any great pile of money out of it.' I don't know what they referred to, but I thought at the time that they had made some trade with you."

"Did they call on you, Nichols?" asked Fitch, "or have you any idea who they were?"

"No, they didn't call and I don't know anything about them."

The old miser spoke crustily, and did not seem to like the turn affairs had taken.

"It's my opinion," declared the skeptic, "that the boy is lying to us. We never could tell when to believe him."

Jeff Flicker heard this remark with unwavering coolness.

"Nobody is obliged to believe me," he returned. "I've given in my evidence, and you can take it, or leave it. I've not got anything at stake."

"I don't doubt your word, Jeff," hastily replied Fitch. "There is no reason why you should lie."

"Unless he's in with the robbers," suggested the doubter, maliciously.

The boy turned upon him with flashing eyes.

"See here, Ben Trask, don't you be too tonguey!" he exclaimed. "I know you hate me—though I don't see your reason—but I won't stand everything. I reckon my record is as good as yours."

There was an approving chorus of comments to this. Trask was not popular, and though he passed as an average citizen, and had some weight in passing events, his neighbors were not sorry to see him so stoutly resisted by the boy.

"Now you all keep quiet," ordered Fitch. "Jeff Flicker is my witness, and I am not going to have him badgered or misused. You hear me, don't you, Trask? Jeff, tell me all about those men."

There was but little more to tell. The men had put up their horse at the livery-stable in an ordinary way, but had aroused Jeff, who slept in the place, in the middle of the night, to take the horse away.

The boy persisted in his statement that the horse belonged in Tulip Center; that the men were disguised; and that he had heard them refer to Nichols and some post-office.

This, simple as it was, might be a clew to the identity of the robbers. Constable Fitch agreed that it probably was, and he acted accordingly.

His first step was to send a messenger to Tulip Center, to try and learn to whom the horse had been let, and to bid the officers there use such means as they could to get a clew to the two men.

He had just done this when his first messenger came back, bringing a report from the Tulip Center post-office, to the effect that a registered letter for Nichols had passed through there the previous day, having been mailed at Chicago.

The fact was then very clearly proven that Nichols's letter had been among the matter taken by the thieves, and the constable was about to go to the old miser when he was accosted by Jeff.

"Mr. Fitch, that letter was very important," said the boy, in a low tone.

"How do you know?"

"Nichols is all broken up. He's moving about as nervous as a fish."

"The loss of five dollars would break him up."

"But he said there was no money in the letter."

"So he did," Fitch thoughtfully admitted.

"Then what was in it?"

"I asked him, and he wouldn't say."

"It strikes me that the old man may have a secret he don't want to tell."

The constable looked sharply at Jeff. He had, himself, attributed all of Nichols's odd and "cranky" acts to his well-known eccentricity and meanness, but Jeff was opening a new train of thought.

"What secret can Nichols have?" Fitch asked.

"He is capable of having 'most any secret,'" Jeff replied, somewhat bitterly.

"You don't seem to like him."

"Do you?"

"No, I don't. Have you any idea what his secret can be—if he has one. If you know give me the clew; you sha'n't lose anything by it."

"Just now I haven't, but I may get the idea. I haven't any faith in Nichols, though, and it may be that you will help somebody besides him by finding that letter. I hope, Mr. Fitch, that you'll try your best!" and with this Jeff walked away, while the officer looked after him thoughtfully.

"There's a queer boy!" he thought. "It has

occurred to me before to-day that he was a good deal out of the ordinary run, and that he has some object in being in Jericho besides working in a livery-stable. I can't imagine what it is, but, just now, I haven't time to follow up my idea. I must see Nichols."

He went to the old fellow, and made another effort to learn the contents of the lost letter.

"That's my affair," declared the miser.

"Do you want that letter found?" Fitch angrily asked.

"It must be found!" Nichols declared.

"Well, I won't try for it unless you act like a reasonable being."

"It is your duty ter find it, an' you've got ter do it!" snapped the old man. "You're an officer, an' a letter is stole. You've got ter find it. What is in it ain't any more your concern than it would be if a bed-tick was stole ter know what it was stuffed with."

"Keep it up!" the constable retorted. "I don't know why I should waste breath on an old crank like you. Let me say, though, that I have some doubt whether the law requires me to hunt for an article unless I know what it is."

"Ain't I said it's a letter?" demanded Nichols.

"Are you big enough fool to suppose that it is a letter now? Of course the robbers have not opened it—of course not! Confound it! that envelope is torn open and burned before now; we must look for the contents, not the letter, and you say you won't state what the contents were."

Nichols looked dazed for a moment, for this argument was a strong one and he knew it, but he soon rallied.

"What I want you ter do, is ter find the men," he replied. "Do this, an' all will be well."

"And you won't say what was in the letter?"

"No, I won't!"

"All right, my hearty," Fitch sharply returned. "If you lose your infernal letter it will be all your own fault; you have tied my hands right at the start. It looks very much to me, Pete, as though you have a guilty secret to hide!"

And the constable turned away in indignation.

CHAPTER III.

JEFF FLICKER'S ADVENTURE.

THE stolen letters were not recovered that day, nor were the robbers found.

Following the clew given by Jeff they learned that two strangers had hired a horse and carriage in Tulip Center the previous day. These had been returned at daybreak, in good condition. The men then disappeared, and there was absolutely no clew to them.

The ticket-agent at the depot was positive that he sold no such men tickets, and no one saw them take the train.

When they paid for the horse the owner thereof had been given view of a good-sized roll of bank-notes, the outside one of which was a hundred-dollar bill. This served to increase the mystery. Why should men so well supplied with money bother themselves to rob a little country post-office?

During the evening Jeff Flicker accosted the constable.

"Anything new, Mr. Fitch?"

"Not a thing, Jeff."

"What did the robbers get by their scoop?"

"Thirteen dollars from the cash-drawer; ten dollars from the first of the registered letters—that belonging to Nelson—and whatever was in old Pete Nichols's letter."

"Have you learned what that was?"

"No. Nichols won't tell."

"Why not?"

"Now you have me. He is a sly old customer who always keeps his business to himself, but he must know that he is running the risk of losing whatever was in the letter. How can we recover what we are after, if we don't know what it is?"

"Can't you make him tell?"

"Hardly."

"Do you think it was some paper?"

"Some paper?"

"Yes. I mean," Jeff hesitatingly added, "some kind of valuable document."

"What put that into your head?" and Fitch again looked sharply at the boy.

"I hardly know."

"Look here, Jeff, I believe you know more about it than you have told."

"You're wrong, Mr. Fitch; but, it occurs to me that, if it wasn't money he lost, it must have been a valuable paper."

"Jeff!"

"Yes, Mr. Fitch?"

"You're a deep one, I begin to think; but you ain't deep enough to deceive me."

"I'm not deceiving you."

"You are keeping something back. There is a mystery to this case, and you could give me light if you would. Mind, I am not laying any blame to your door; I don't think you know about the robbery, but about the lost letter."

"You are wrong now," replied Jeff, though there was a noticeable flush in his face. "I don't know what Nichols has lost, but, knowing him as I do, I can't get rid of the idea that it is a paper."

"Then why don't he say so?"

"He may not dare to."

"How so?"

"Nichols," answered Jeff, with signs of embarrassment, "has never been considered a very honest man. He may have had something sent to him which he would not want every one to see."

The constable looked fixedly at Jeff for a few seconds in silence.

"I will see!" he then returned, abruptly, and with this he turned away.

He had gained an idea, and intended to test it if he could. The idea pointed to Jeff Flicker, and his investigations would tend in the same direction!

Jeff did not try to stop him, but, turning away, went to his supper. This done he returned to the stable where he was employed. Two horses were out, but they soon came in, and when he had properly cared for them, the lad closed and fastened the outside door and sat down in the little room where he slept—it being a corner of the stable which was partitioned off for his use.

Having sat down, he fell into deep thought and became unconscious of all around him.

Constable Fitch had not been far out of the way when he surmised that there was a mystery about Jeff Flicker. The boy had an object in being in Jericho; an object which could not be gained anywhere else; and, after a good deal of patient waiting, he was of the opinion that he was soon to win or lose all.

As has before been said, he was generally looked down upon by the people of Jericho, and was disliked by many who could not have given any clear explanation of their dislike.

He was a daily worker in a business which was not considered very elevated, to say the least, and his plain clothing made him seem to the ridiculous gentility of the town a person below them in the social scale.

He was a reserved boy, who made few confidants, and it was not generally known that he had a supply of books in his little room to which he devoted a good deal of his attention.

Unpopular he might be, but he was one who bade fair to rise in the world. He was one of those quiet, strong-minded boys who do not attract so much attention as a noisy one, as they go along, but who are pretty sure to make a success in life when they try.

For an hour Jeff sat there in deep thought. He did not seem to find his meditations very pleasant, but acted philosophically, and ended by quietly rising and making preparations to go to bed.

This done, he was not long in falling asleep.

Silence reigned in and around the stable, except for the occasional tramping of the horses. This was a familiar sound, and did not in any way interfere with his rest. He slept on peacefully.

Several hours passed, and the little clock in Jeff's room pointed to one o'clock.

Then it was that the boy awoke and started to a sitting position. He had a vague idea that some sound had aroused him, and that it was caused by a patron who was at the outside door, rapping to arouse him and hire a horse.

He was, however, hardly prepared for what he saw.

There was a light in the stable!

Now, this was a very unusual thing. The stable was always kept fastened at night; the door being locked and the windows barred; and his employer was the only outside person who possessed a key to the door. This man never came there at night, yet there was a light now, and—

Yes, some one was in the stable!

Two men were there.

Jeff looked in surprise, and as he did so the words of challenge which were on his lips were arrested. The men were not residents of the village; they were entire strangers to him.

Jeff had no idea of speaking after he had made this discovery. He knew that the men were there for no good purpose, and as it was equally clear that they had forced their way in,

he leaped to the conclusion that they were horse-thieves.

He glanced at the outer door.

It was closed, and showed no signs of having been tampered with.

The men had been in consultation, but one now held the lantern close to the stable floor, and they began a slow and careful search, as though they had dropped something.

They paid no attention to the horses.

Jeff watched secretly, silently, wonderingly. What were they there for? What had they dropped? These questions were not easily answered.

It was clear, however, that they were not there with any lawful purpose, and as he could not well oppose them with hope of success, he began to consider how he could give the alarm. He glanced at the window of his room. The bars which had been put on to prevent any intruder from entering, now kept him in when he ought to be out.

He could not remove them without betraying his purpose by the noise.

The men continued their search, and it soon occurred to Jeff as peculiar that they did not confine their search to any particular point. They seemed to be making a systematic examination of the whole stable floor, and nowhere else did they look so carefully as in the out-of-the-way corners.

"That's very odd!" muttered Jeff.

His wonder increased as the search went on. It was minute and careful. Every particle of rubbish was moved and, in some cases, poked over as anxiously as the gold-digger looks for the precious ore he hunts for in the sand.

What they sought did not seem to appear, and they finally paused and began to converse, their faces expressing deep disappointment.

The words, however, were inaudible to Jeff.

Suddenly he had an idea, and one which startled him.

Might not these men be the post-office robbers?

As this occurred to him, he looked at them more narrowly. He had all along insisted that the men who had put up their horse with him had been disguised, and did not expect any marked likeness.

He looked most at their forms. There he believed that he saw a resemblance, and his suspicions increased. He grew excited, too. If they were the two who had stabled their horse with him, he believed they were also the post-office burglars.

No wonder he was excited. If this was true, the guilty parties were almost within his reach.

Again he looked at the window of his little room. The bars were plainly visible, and showed him that he could not pass. Before, they had seemed a very necessary part of the stable; now, they were hateful enough to his sight.

"How can I get out?" he thought, desperately. "If the robbers are right here, they must be caught. It depends on me to give the alarm, and rally folks, but I can't do it while I'm here—and how am I to get out?"

Sure enough, that was a hard matter to settle. If he left the room, he would at once be pounced upon by the men, while the window was clearly impassable.

The men resumed their strange search, and Jeff watched them mechanically. What were they after? Clearly, no trivial matter had brought them back to the scene of their robbery, and the only explanation was that when in the stable before they had lost something of value.

Presently one of the men suddenly straightened up.

"See here!" he exclaimed in an audible voice, "I am for searching the office at once. I'll do it while you hold a revolver at the head of that young hound of a boy. If he wakes up, put a bullet through him. I'll bet it's in the office. Let's see."

"All right," replied the second man, readily.

And then both started for Jeff Flicker's little room. Fresh danger menaced the boy.

CHAPTER IV.

BOY VS. MEN.

JEFF proved equal to the emergency. There was only one course for him to pursue, and he realized what that was at once. To remain and face these men would be foolhardy; to run away was impossible; his one resort was to feign sleep.

He cast himself down upon his humble bed, which was little larger than himself, assumed an easy position and closed his eyes.

The two men entered the stable boy's room.

"He is still asleep," observed one, flashing the light on the apparently sleeping Jeff.

"He'd better remain so."

"Well, you sit down beside him while I search. If he opens his eyes, shoot!"

"Bob's" voice was hard and implacable.

Jeff Flicker heard the click of a revolver, but did not move or open his eyes. Satisfied that these men would kill him without compunction if danger menaced them, he was content to lie and feign sleep. He was not in a panic, however, and his cool mind was resolving every chance and seeking for a way to get the best of the men.

The search of the room was conducted with the same care that Jeff had before noticed. Jeff had kept the place very clean, and there was no rubbish on the floor; but every corner was looked into and everything moved that was movable, except the bed.

As Bob searched he also talked.

"I don't expect to find it here."

"You may."

"I may find a gold-mine!" Bob retorted.

"It's pretty sure that it's in this stable."

"Unless it's been found."

"I think we'd heard of it if it had been."

"I ain't so sure of that. Suppose this boy had found it. He's a miserable beggar, and it would have been a rich haul for him. D'ye suppose he would give it up?"

The man with the revolver looked sharply at Jeff.

"What if it's about him now?"

"By Jove! I didn't think of that."

"It may be in his pocket."

"Yes."

Bob ceased work, and stood looking down at the apparently soundly sleeping stable boy.

"Shall we wake him up?" he added.

"I don't approve of it. Can't we reach him as he is?"

"Most likely he will wake up."

"I don't know. Boys of his age sleep soundly, and some of them could be rolled clear across this room without waking them. Go ahead and search, and if he wakes up, I'll be ready with the barker. The boy won't 'bark'!"

This point being settled, Bob proceeded with his work. The way in which he did it suggested that he was no new hand at picking pockets. His movements were very skillful, and if Jeff had really been asleep, he would hardly have been disturbed.

As it was, he feigned sleep successfully.

Bob finished the search and growled like a disappointed bear.

"It ain't there," he declared.

"I reckon it's really lost," his friend replied.

"Lost! It'll turn up sooner or later, see if it don't. Such things always do. I'm sorry we ever took hold of this job."

"We got the letter, didn't we?"

"Yes; and we'll have the cash, too."

"Bet your life we will! Old Nichols must feel rusty, I swear. He's played his little game, and is so much money out—and no paper to show for it. Serves the old rascal right. Anybody mean enough to rob an orphan girl ought to be lynched."

"If you're so interested in orphans, why not send the paper to her?" and a sly smile accompanied the suggestion.

"I ain't a fool!" was the retort. "Business is business, and we've got to look out for ourselves. Sadie Pickett must do the same."

Jeff Flicker found it hard to lie there quietly while this talk was going on. For reasons best known to himself, it was all of vital importance, and there he had to remain like a statue.

Despite this, he felt disappointed when Bob suddenly observed that they were wasting time. The men left the room and resumed their search in the main part of the stable.

They had no sooner left his den than Jeff was upon his feet. He knew at last that these men were the post-office burglars and he was more than ever anxious to see them captured.

In some way or other he must escape from the stable and give the alarm.

As they went out the light of their lantern fell momentarily upon the wide outer door, and he saw that the key was in the lock. Their mode of operation then occurred to him; they had probably thrown back the bolt of the lock from the outside, and then, when once inside, had reinserted the key, which had been left hanging near the door, and relocked the door.

Since there was no secret way out, and the windows were all barred, it now became Jeff's great desire to pass out of the door.

If he could reach it, one turn of the key would open a way of escape.

He determined to act promptly.

Dropping upon his hands and knees he began to creep along in the shadows with all possible caution. Possibly he could escape with a rush, but, in that case, the men would have a good chance to get away before he could summon help.

They were now engaged in the search.

Silently Jeff moved toward the door.

It was a moment of great suspense, and the chances of reaching the door unseen were so against him that he watched keenly and was ready for a rush if necessary.

Foot by foot he moved along.

The men, talking in low voices, seemed absorbed in their work.

At last, only a few feet separated him from the door, but he was so near the intruders that it seemed strange they did not hear his movements. He moved further, and very cautiously; then he slowly arose to his feet. His hand moved forward to grasp the key.

At that very moment one of the men suddenly turned about. His actions did not indicate alarm, but he could not very well avoid seeing Jeff.

He did see him, and a fierce exclamation fell from his lips.

His hand flashed to his pocket, and, in a moment more a revolver glittered in the light.

Secrecy was then out of the question. Jeff Flicker made one spring, grasped the key and turned it in the lock. The bolt flew back, and he tore the door open. As he did so there was a sharp click-click!

"Don't fire!" cried a voice.

The caution came too late; the man did fire, and a bullet actually cut a lock of hair from Jeff's head. It was a harmless shot, however, and the nimble boy did not give them a second chance.

Even in that time of danger he kept his wits about him, and had secured the key. Once outside he pulled the door to with a bang. In a moment more there was another click—he had turned the key in the lock and the men were shut in!

He heard fierce exclamations from them, and the barrier was violently shaken.

The men were wild with anger and alarm.

A smile crossed Jeff Flicker's face, but he did not wait to see the result of his last act. The intruders, if left to themselves, were sure to escape, sooner or later, and help must be brought at once.

He darted away down the street, his face being toward Constable Fitch's house. As he went the racket increased behind him; the entrapped ruffians were doing their best to get out.

Jeff's feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground as he darted away, and in a minute he was at the constable's house. No light was visible, and, believing that the official was in bed and asleep, he began to hammer upon the door with all his strength. The sooner Fitch was aroused, the better; it would not take the men long to escape from the stable if they worked in earnest.

Great was Jeff's satisfaction when, after a very brief pause, an upper window was suddenly raised.

"Hallo! who is there?" demanded a voice.

"Quick, Mr. Fitch!" cried Jeff; "I've got work for you. I think the post-office robbers are in town! I've got them locked in the stable. Come down at once, or they will get out and escape."

"I'll be there in a second."

The window closed with a bang; there was a brief racket inside, and then the constable came hurrying out, fully dressed.

"I don't understand this at all—"

"Don't stop to learn," Jeff replied, quickly. "Let it be enough for now to say that two men are in the stable, locked in, and there ain't a shadow of doubt but they're the mail-robbers—"

"All right. Go and wake up half a dozen men, and I'll go to the stable at once. If the rascals ain't out yet, I'll hold them there until you bring help. I'll shoot them if they try to pass me!"

CHAPTER V.

A LIVELY RACKET.

FITCH flourished a revolver as he spoke, and it was plain to be seen that he had caught Jeff's fever fully. He now gave the boy a slight push.

"Be off with you!" he exclaimed.

Then he turned and ran toward the stable.

When he reached it he found the place wholly dark, and it began to look as though the men had made good their escape, but he noticed that the big door was still closed.

Acting upon a sudden idea, he hurried around to the rear. As he did so he heard a rending sound, and something went rattling down on the rocks below.

"A bar from the window?" he thought.

At that moment a head became dimly visible at the opening. Fitch smiled grimly: his game was still there. Determined to keep them there he raised his revolver and fired a shot. He was a good marksman, and he took care not to hit the target.

The head suddenly disappeared, and he heard a savage exclamation inside.

"There you are, my hearties!" he called out. "See that you stay there. The first man who tries to get out will get a dose of lead!"

Utter silence from the stable; all was as still as though the robbers had been miles away.

"They're no fools!" thought Fitch; "and, being the opposite of fools, there is bound to be fun here pretty quick. They'll make a rush; that's what they will do; and when it comes I want somebody to back me up, *bad!*"

He looked around somewhat anxiously, but no one was in sight. Fitch was brave enough, but he knew how desperate, lawless men could fight, and was anxious to have support.

There was a slight stir in the stable.

"They're coming!" he muttered.

So was somebody else. He heard the patter of feet, and three of his neighbors rushed up without any of their day-clothes on except their trowsers. He recognized them, and took prompt measures to let the robbers know that he had help.

"Surround the stable!" he ordered, in a loud voice. "Six of you go to the front, and three on each of the other sides."

Then he added, in a low tone:

"Stay right here, boys; it's here they will make the break, if anywhere. I reckon Jeff Flicker will soon stir up more help."

"That boy is as lively as a flea."

"He's a good one."

"He is showing up well."

The citizen made the admission rather reluctantly; he did not like to grant that there was any good in Jeff Flicker.

The last word had barely passed his lips when he gave an acrobatic leap. A shot had been fired from the stable, and the lump of lead had passed within an inch of his head.

"Great Scott! that was a close call!" he cried.

"They're wide-awake in there."

"Look out for a rush," advised Fitch. "They are merely scaring us now preparatory to the real work. Any of you armed?"

"I've got a revolver," replied one man; but the others could boast of nothing better than clubs which they had picked up as they ran.

Then three more men arrived, and the total force was increased to seven. Fitch sent one of his party to the opposite side of the stable, to watch for developments there, while the others took position to resist a rush. Their number would soon be increased so that he could assume the offensive, which he intended to do as soon as was possible.

The robbers would have been stupid, indeed, not to realize the facts of the case, and just as stupid to wait until they were hemmed in past hope.

They did not wait.

Fitch was watching the window when he saw a dark object flash through with almost cat-like quickness. It struck on the ground, and then a second object flashed after it.

The robbers had made the expected break.

Agile fellows they proved to be, and in a moment they were upon their feet, fair and square and "pointing" for flight.

"Surrender!" shouted Fitch, in a loud voice, as he waved his revolver.

"You go to perdition!" and with this retort the robbers started off. The constable fired his revolver, aiming at the legs of the nearest man, and by so doing he stirred up a good-sized hornet's nest.

The robbers wheeled, and then their own revolvers began to work like machines. Lead whistled around the ears of the villagers in a startling way. Fitch felt a stinging sensation in one arm which told him he was wounded.

The villagers had started in a body to head off the fugitives, but this warm reception alarmed them. They gave ground, and with a scornful laugh the desperadoes dashed away.

"After them!" cried Fitch. "Don't let them escape."

And he first sent a bullet whistling after the runaways, and then led the pursuit.

The robbers had a clear field, and they started down the street at a rate of speed which would have done credit to a race-horse; but, after

them came the constable's party, uttering yells which bade fair to arouse the whole village.

The fugitives, however, soon showed that they knew what they were about.

Having reached a certain point they darted from the street and ran between two houses—whereupon such of the pursuers as had revolvers, becoming alarmed, opened a brisk fire—and, seemingly unhurt, disappeared for the time.

Fitch's party followed, though, and, a moment later, were treated to a spectacle which gave them no pleasure.

The runaways, as it proved, had tied their horse to a tree, and as they dashed up one of them cut the tie-rope with one sweep of his knife, and in a moment's time both were seated in the light buggy.

Down came the whip, and away dashed the horse with great bounds.

Constable Fitch uttered a groan and, coming to a halt, fired the two shots which remained in his revolver with as good aim as possible.

Derisive laughter flicated back to him.

"Don't give up!" he shouted. "Pursue! pursue! We may get them yet!"

"Come on, your nibs!" yelled one of the robbers.

"Try a race with Christmas!" tauntingly advised his companion.

"Buy a pair of smaller boots!"

"Get the hayseed out of your hair!"

These jeering shouts were sent back by the fugitives as they steadily increased their lead, but the constable and his party were full of courage. They ran on until the robbers were nearly gone, and their breath quite so.

Just at that moment there was the beat of heavier feet behind them, and up rushed Jeff Flicker on one of the stable horses. The boy, who could ride like a jockey, was seated lightly on the horse's back, and he soon proved that his head was as level as ever.

"I'll keep watch of them!" he cried. "Send out men and have the alarm given; we may be able to stop them by telegraph, if not in any other way. Where they go I'll follow, and we'll have 'em yet."

Fitch tried to speak and ask Jeff to give him the horse, but his breath was short, and before he could command speech the boy had flashed past and was gone after the runaways.

The constable came to a halt.

"That boy is plucky, he is," the officer gasped.

"Probably he'll capture 'em all," derisively suggested the doubter.

"I reckon he'll try."

"They'll shoot the little varmint."

"I ain't so sure of that," Fitch returned. "He's a good one, and it wouldn't surprise me to see him give a good account of himself."

Unconscious of these comments, Jeff was speeding after the robbers. His was no wild, ill-considered pursuit, nor did he dream of attempting to capture the men in single-handed fight. He had outlined his own work in what he said to Fitch. If he could hang upon the trail of the runaways until day dawned, and they reached a village, he could then give the alarm.

He had secured a revolver, but intended to use it only as a measure of defense, should this become necessary; which he hoped would not be the case.

There was no difficulty in the pursuit at this stage of affairs.

The robbers had re-entered the road which led to Tulip Center, and were plainly visible. Jeff had little fear that they would outstrip him. He had selected the best horse in the stable, and as matters were otherwise all in his favor, he did not intend to lose sight of the fugitives.

On he galloped, and in a few minutes had so reduced their lead that he eased up.

While they were urging their horse to his utmost, he could keep his own fresh and be ready for any emergency.

Jericho village was left behind, and they were now passing along the broad highway.

Jeff knew that he had been seen by the men. They turned several times and looked at him, but he kept beyond the reach of their revolvers.

CHAPTER VI. THE BRIDGE BARRICADE.

FOR some time the state of affairs remained unchanged, but as they drew further away from Jericho it became clear that the ruffians were ill at ease.

They had evidently divined Jeff's purpose, in which case they could not fail to see trouble ahead.

Finally they slackened speed and, looking back more than ever, gave him all the chance in the world to overtake them, at which Jeff smiled grimly.

"Nice little game, but I don't believe it will work," and he slackened his own speed to correspond with theirs.

Their next experiment was to come to a full stop, but as soon as they did so Jeff also pulled up, and there he sat upon his horse, cool and smiling. He was pleased to know that he was worrying the desperadoes and making them lose time.

The men soon started on again; so did Jeff. They went a hundred yards, and then once more paused; so did Jeff.

Then an angry shout arose.

"I say, you fool!" cried one of the fugitives, "what do you want? Why are you dogging us?"

"This road is free to all, ain't it?"

"We'll show you if you don't clear out!" was the fierce reply.

"When will you begin?"

"Right away."

"All right—begin!"

Jeff smiled, for he really liked the situation.

Suddenly one of them sprung from the buggy and started back. Jeff felt sure that he carried a revolver, and with another smile the boy turned his horse and rode slowly back.

While the robbers were fooling around with him they were not increasing their distance from Jericho!

The same idea seemed in the mind of his pursuer, and as he saw that Jeff would not allow him to get to a position of advantage, he began to free his mind in a way more emphatic than polite or religious. Wheeling once more he rejoined his companion, and Jeff advanced to his old position.

These was some loud and angry talk from the men, who were getting seriously troubled. Whether they recognized Jeff is uncertain, but they did see the damage that any one person could do them by thus persistently upon their trail.

For a few moments they lingered, and seemed to be consulting earnestly; then, suddenly turning, they gave their horse a cut with the whip, and went off at full speed.

After that they did not once look around, but seemed wholly absorbed in getting away from Jericho. They certainly made good time.

At the end of a mile Jeff grew more alert. They were nearing Joggle Meadow—the sub-village where old Peter Nichols lived—and there was a possibility that something would happen there. Really, Jeff did not expect a diversion in his favor, for the hour was still so early that no one was likely to be astir.

The village was skirted by Roaring Brook, a stream which was only a small affair during the summer season, but, owing to the peculiar land formation, was a brawling river in the spring, when the winter snows melted. It had cut for itself a wide channel, and, at Joggle Meadow, was spanned by a covered bridge seventy feet long. Twenty-five feet below was the brook, now only a thread which flowed tortuously through a wider belt of stones.

It occurred to Jeff that the fugitives might attempt some trick upon him in the dark cover of the bridge, and he determined not to go within revolver-shot of it until he had seen them emerge from the opposite side—something easy enough to see, since the road there made a slight bend to the left.

Accordingly, he held back somewhat.

It seemed that his precaution had been unnecessary, however, for the team dashed through without any pause, and then went rolling into the village.

Once more Jeff urged his horse forward—he wanted to be close upon them at that point, so that if any of the people of Joggle Meadow were astir he could give the alarm.

His horse dashed upon the bridge at a gallop.

All was intensely dark there, owing to the cover overhead, but Jeff had been across many times before, and did not hesitate. The bridge had been solid and safe, as he well knew.

He did not know what changes had taken place.

His horse was galloping along when footings failed him in front, and he went down. So did Jeff Flicker. The boy was a fine rider, but he had been totally unprepared for any accident there; and the result was that he shot forward like a flash over his horse's head.

Instinctively he put out his hands to break the force of his fall.

Down he went, and then a sharp pain shot through his side as he struck something with

force which almost drove the breath from his body; but even then he did not stop.

He continued to fall!

It flashed upon him that the bridge had been tampered with; that the fall of his horse was due to the fact that some of the planks had been removed; and that from the same cause he was now falling through to the brook below.

Once more he made a clutch to save himself; he caught one of the "sleepers," but a fragment of loose bark was all that he held.

Down he went.

There was an interval of suspense, during which he went erratically through the air, and then he struck in the brook with a great splash.

Instantly a feeling of relief swept over him. He had expected to strike full upon the bare rocks, and it was a lucky chance which caused him to alight where he did.

The water was deep enough to break his fall, and, feeling no ill effects, he made an effort and crawled from the brook.

The ruling passion was still strong within him, and, anxious to continue the pursuit, he wondered if his horse had met with any great harm. He arose to his feet, but, as he did so, the sharp pain shot through his side again and his head seemed to swim about in a strange way. He reeled—made an effort to stand—and fell to the ground again.

Then consciousness deserted him.

The little brook went flowing on lazily, almost touching the senseless boy—that was the only visible motion near the place.

And the night wore on.

Finally Jeff Flicker's wandering senses came back. He opened his eyes and saw the light of day. He was surprised to find himself in such a strange place, but recollection soon returned. He looked up at the bridge above. Five or six planks had been removed, and it was this which had caused all his trouble.

"And the robbers got away after all!"

He muttered these words aloud; even then he was true to the purpose which had sent him out upon this adventure.

Then he thought more of himself. He moved slightly, and found that he was so lame and sore every movement was accompanied with extreme pain. His injury was no trifling matter.

He was summoning courage for another effort when a new sound met his hearing. It was the crunching of the pebbles in the bed of the brook. He turned his head to discover the cause.

He was no longer alone.

A girl who looked to be thirteen years of age had come down the bank and was crossing the dry part of Roaring Brook. In one hand she carried a wooden pail, and it was clear that she was coming to the brook for water.

Suddenly she paused.

Almost at the moment that Jeff discovered her he was seen in return, and the girl paused in great surprise. If Jeff had but known it he did not present a very agreeable appearance, just then, for he was covered with mud, and his clothes were still saturated with water.

He, however, was thinking of something else. He knew the girl, and there was an eager light in his eyes.

"Don't be frightened," he said, quickly.

The girl looked at him and said nothing.

"Don't leave me," he added. "I am hurt."

"What are you doing here?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I fell through the bridge."

She glanced upward.

"Why, some of the planks are torn up."

"I reckon they are," Jeff grimly replied, as a new movement on his part gave him a fresh, sharp pain. "Say, you're Peter Nichols's girl, ain't you?"

"I live at his house," she returned, as though her correction meant a good deal.

"All right; I thought so. Now, I want you to help me to his house!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRONG-MINDED WOMAN.

The girl looked somewhat startled by Jeff's last words.

"I don't know as I had better take you to the house," she answered.

"Why not?"

"Mr. Nichols might not like it."

"Why shouldn't he like it?"

"He isn't very—that is, I'm afraid he wouldn't like to have you there."

"Wouldn't he take in a sick person?"

"I don't know."

She answered hesitatingly, and seemed so embarrassed that Jeff quickly added:

"I know how it is; Nichols is so mean that he won't do anybody a good turn if he can help it, and then, only when he's paid for it. Well, I can pay him, if he wants, and one thing is sure; I can't stay down in this hole."

"I'll get somebody else to help you," the girl abruptly replied.

"Wait a bit, Sadie. Your name is Sadie, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll try to get up, and see how bad I am."

He made the effort, but found that it cost him a good deal of pain, and that he was weak and dizzy.

"It's no use," he continued; "I've got to have help. Now, I don't believe there is anybody up in the whole of Joggle Meadow but Nichols's folks, so I want you to go right to him. He won't hurt you, and if he comes, I'll attend to the rest."

"Well, I'll do as you say."

Sadie spoke reluctantly, but, having settled the point, made haste to fill her pail with water, and then went back up the bank.

Jeff Flicker looked after her curiously.

"I didn't think it would be in this way that I should make her acquaintance, but it don't make any difference. I believe that I now see a way to get into Nichols's house, and just at this time there may be something of interest to be learned there. If I can get a point on the miser, I may be able to settle up the case which brought me to Jericho. I'd like to do it, and get away."

The boy sat upon the stones in deep thought until he heard Peter Nichols's shrill voice in the distance. It came nearer, and then Sadie descended the bank again, followed by the old man.

He turned his sharp, ferret-like eyes upon Jeff.

"What's this?" he asked, in a harsher voice than usual. "I can't help you—Oh! it's you is it?"

"Yes, it's I, Mr. Nichols, and you see I am in a bad fix."

"You'd no business ter git inter a fix."

"But I fell through the bridge while chasing the post-office robbers."

"Eh? What?"

"Fact, sir; I was pursuing them."

"When? Last night?"

"Yes."

"How'd they git here?"

"They went back to Jericho, and we got after them. I should have caught them, too, only for the bridge, but somebody had taken up the planks. I believe they did it, and that it was a game to prevent pursuit. You see they are only torn up on the right side—the north track. I suppose they crossed on the south track, but I held to the usual course and came to grief."

"Why didn't you ketch 'em?" excitedly demanded the old man.

"I tried hard, but when a fellow gets a fall that knocks his senses out of him, that lays him out for awhile."

"How did it happen?"

Jeff gave a very brief account of the whole affair, seeing that he had interested Nichols.

"And now you see I am laid out," he added.

"Bad fur you," the old man said, unfeelingly.

"Can't you take me to your house?"

"No, no; can't be done. Out of the question. Nobody ter take care on ye."

"I'll pay you for it, Mr. Nichols."

"Eh? What? You ain't got any money."

Nichols looked suspiciously at the boy.

"I've got enough to pay you, and I'll do it. I don't want to lie here in the brook."

"I don't keep a charity hospital," continued Nichols.

"Haven't I said I'd pay you?"

"But where's the money?"

"Don't you worry about that; I've said you shall be paid, and so you shall."

"Well, well, you can come in, but I can't afford ter do it fur nothin'. I'm a poor man, an' times is hard; drefful hard. Takes a good 'eal o' plannin' ter make both ends meet, nowadays. It's hard ter be poor!"

The miser's shrill voice dropped to a whine as he made these complaints. Jeff felt like shrinking from him in disgust. Nichols was rich for a farmer, and everybody knew it. He had grown rich by economy of the meanest kind, and by dishonest practices just within the pale of the law.

"You shall have your pay, sir," the boy replied.

He hated himself for applying a word of respect to such a man, but it was policy.

"Then take my arm," Nichols added.

He gave his aid, and Jeff gained his feet once more. Sadie, after lingering until this time, retreated up the bank. They followed. Every movement gave Jeff pain in his side, and he began to be afraid that some of his ribs were broken, but he persevered and finally gained the top of the bank.

By this time the momentary dizziness he had felt on rising began to disappear, and he looked toward the house with some eagerness.

Possibly the most eventful part of his life was about to begin.

He knew that besides Sadie, who was not Nichols's daughter, and only there to do what work he could get out of her, the miser's family consisted of his wife and sister.

Mrs. Nichols, who was not the worst woman in the world, was far advanced in second childhood, and was a mere nonentity.

Miss Betsey, the sister, was a spinster on the wrong side of sixty, and fully as bad as old Peter. In fact, she probably had the worst reputation of any one in Jericho.

Jeff Flicker was well aware that he was going among hard people. The only one to be depended upon was orphaned Sadie, and it was a notorious fact that she was badly abused by Peter and his sister.

The outlook was not pleasant, but Jeff knew what he was about and did not waver.

Nichols conducted him into the kitchen, and then, raising his voice, called the name "Betsey" several times. The last shrill call was followed by the appearance of that person, tall, bony, harsh-faced and masculine.

"Here's a boy, Betsey," explained Peter.

"What on't?" demanded Betsey.

"He's hurt, an' I took him in."

Miss Betsey placed her arms akimbo and glared at Jeff as though he had done her a personal injury.

"What he is hurt?" she severely demanded.

"Oh! he's goin' ter pay me, Betsey."

"Do ye know him?"

"I've seen him at Jericho."

"You'd better send him to Jericho!" asserted the maiden lady, sternly, as she tried to frighten Jeff by the glare of her terrible eyes.

"Don't be hard on me, Miss Nichols," answered the boy, with a serious meekness he was far from feeling, really. "I am hurt, and I will pay you to be taken care of until I can get back."

"Where's yer money?" she brusquely asked.

"At Jericho."

"How do we know we'll get it?"

"Oh! you shall. I promise—"

"I don't care a snap for promises!" declared the masculine woman.

"Betsey, it's all right," began Nichols, but she interrupted him:

"You let me alone, Peter; I know what I am talkin' about. I'm talkin' to a boy, an' I wouldn't trust a boy as far as I could throw a yearlin' heifer. I know what boys are—they're thieves an' liars!"

And she shook her fist at Jeff Flicker.

"There has to be a boy, now and then," replied Jeff, continuing his show of meekness.

"Yes, an' there has ter be fevers, an' roomatis, an' colic. They're all alike."

"But this boy will pay us, Betsey," urged old Peter, "an' we are poor—"

"You hush up, Peter Nichols!" retorted his very affectionate sister. "I am doin' this business."

It was clear that she was doing it, and just as clear that she was not a nonentity in the family, if Peter's wife was. She still stood with her arms akimbo, looking as hard, coarse and unfeeling as some ill-sculptured piece of marble.

Suddenly she turned upon Sadie.

"What are you doin' here, Lazy-bones?" she savagely demanded. "Don't stan' starin' like a hyena. Git ter work, or I'll trounce ye!"

The orphaned girl went away meekly, a startled look in her face.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" the virago then demanded, of Jeff.

"I've had a fall from the bridge—"

"You had no business ter fall from the bridge, but ef you can pay for bein' sick, I don't care. Go in there an' lay down."

She pointed to the next room as she spoke.

"Mr. Nichols," added Jeff, who was not at all alarmed by her fierce ways, "I want some one to ride to Jericho with a message for Mr. Fitch."

"I'll bring a boy here," the old man cautiously replied. "You must hire him; I won't. I'm not goin' ter pay nobody's bill. I'll get a boy."

And he hobbled out of the room, leaving Jeff with Miss Betsey.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN WITH SECRETS.

JEFF FLICKER was still the target of Miss Betsey's most severe regard, but he bore it very composedly, and kept up his mask of meekness. She had told him to go into the other room, and with a polite remark to her he went.

It did not prove to be a bedroom, as he had expected, but a big, old-fashioned lounge stood in one corner, and upon this he at once lay down.

He was glad enough to do so.

Every moment that he remained standing he could feel the pain in his side, and though it was less acute than when he first recovered consciousness in the brook, he was glad to avoid it as much as possible.

Once more alone he summed up his case carefully. He believed that he was well enough to return to Jericho village with the messenger, but this he did not intend to do.

Chance had made him an inmate of Peter Nichols's house, and, for reasons of his own, he wished to stay there. It seemed an odd choice, for a more disagreeable place could not be found in all Jericho, but he knew what he was about.

When he first settled in Jericho he had done so with a fixed purpose, and one which nobody suspected. Events had, of late, taken a forward step, and he believed that his plans could be served nowhere else so well as in Peter Nichols's house.

If his real object had been known, Miss Betsey would have found her worst opinion of boys confirmed—in her opinion—and no amount of money would have induced old Peter to let him remain.

Soon after Jeff lay down he heard Miss Betsey go up-stairs; and then her voice arose in shrill scolding. No doubt unfortunate Sadie was the object of her anger. Jeff frowned at the thought.

Just then the door opened.

The fourth member of the household appeared.

It was Peter Nichols's wife.

She was a little, thin-faced, pale, hesitating woman, whose expression—what little there was of it—was that of deep melancholy. She looked at Jeff but the vacant expression did not vanish from her face.

"Good-morning," said Jeff.

"Good-morning," was the mild reply. "Is the carriage ready?"

"What carriage?"

"The one to take us to the funeral."

"Are you going to a funeral?"

"Why, of course. We are all going."

She sat down, and, looking at him with her vacant eyes, added like a machine:

"The carriages will be here at one o'clock. Of course we shall all wear our best clothes. If there is any one thing I pride myself upon, it is to make a good appearance at funerals."

"Naturally," answered Jeff, pityingly, for he saw that her mind was almost wholly gone.

"There is something about funerals that I like," continued Mrs. Nichols. "It is real pleasant to watch the bereaved ones and see how they act. Some women had rather go to weddings, but I think they are kind of sad. The female relatives of the bride envy her so that they shed a good many tears. They make believe it is because they are parting with her, but that is all nonsense. We have to be deep in this world—deep! deep!"

The speaker nodded to Jeff, and a transient gleam of cunning appeared in her eyes.

"I am deep," she added, "and I know things which everybody don't know."

And she nodded again.

"What things?" Jeff asked, eagerly.

Mrs. Nichols looked toward the door, and then, seeing that no one was visible, lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper and replied:

"Secrets!"

"Yes; but what secrets?"

"Many secrets; piles of secrets. I fancy," the unfortunate woman added, with visible pride, "there are few women know more secrets than I do."

And she nodded three times in succession.

"What secrets do you know?" asked Jeff, who had good reason to be deeply interested.

"Oh! I don't tell; I never tell secrets. Sometimes I want to. When I go to a funeral I feel so cheerful and happy that I'd like to tell a few secrets. Funerals," Mrs. Nichols added, leveling one finger at Jeff, "are a woman's weak p'int. When she sees the other women cry she feels that a lot of old scores are being paid off; that's why women like to go to funerals."

"Yes; but what about your secrets?"

Jeff was anxious to keep her to the subject.

"What secrets?" she asked blankly.

"The ones you know."

"Ah! ab! Yes; my secrets!"

The woman chuckled with visible satisfaction.

"What about them?"

Jeff asked the question persuasively, and she leaned forward and resumed her mysterious whisper.

"There are secrets in this house," she announced, "which would startle you. The house is full of them. They hide in the walls, and under the floors, and in the cupboards, and everywhere. Secrets! I know them all. I could go to a funeral and tell secrets that would astonish folks."

"Tell me one of your secrets, please."

"They are family affairs. If there is a family that has secrets," quoth Mrs. Nichols, wagging her head, "it is this family. And such ones, too! Secrets that are dark; secrets that are deadly; secrets that tell of wrong-doing; secrets that tell of crime!"

The idea conveyed by her last words seemed to frighten her; her expression grew startled, and as a footstep sounded up-stairs she suddenly arose.

"They're coming!" she whispered, sibilantly; "they're coming, and I must go. Don't you tell them I have been here: if they knew that I had told any of their secrets they would kill me. Keep it quiet. I'll see you at the funeral."

At the last words she glided from the room, and Jeff Flicker did not try to detain her.

He was considerably excited by what she had said. True, her mind was nearly a wreck, but, judging by what he knew, he could not get rid of the impression that there was more than vague talk about what she had hinted.

Secrets!

She had said that the house was full of them—dark, deadly secrets, that pointed to wrongdoing and crime.

Jeff knew her reputation. She had always been a mild, meek woman, who was crushed down by the strong minds of Peter and his sister. How much she had known of their private affairs in the old days was uncertain, but she must have known something.

Nonentity that she had been, she was not blind.

"I'd give my last cent if I could get her to talk," thought Jeff Flicker, excitedly. "I'll bet there is that in her mind which, if I could learn it, would end my work at once. I must—I WILL get her to talk!"

It was a resolution which many persons would have pronounced wild, but from that moment it was his great ambition to get Mrs. Nichols to tell the secrets of that house.

In a few minutes old Peter returned.

He brought with him a boy who was all ready to go to Jericho village; but the boy stated that he thought Fitch and his party had passed through Joggle Meadow during the night, which would indicate that they were still on the post-office robbers' trail.

If so, they had somehow passed the bridge in safety; probably by taking the lower side, in which case they would find no upturned planks.

Jeff, however, gave the boy a long message for Fitch, and then, having also directed him to bring a doctor, the young fellow was allowed to go.

Shortly after Miss Betsey came down-stairs, stiff, erect, cold and harsh as ever.

With considerable severity she informed Jeff that she had prepared a room for him on the floor above, and that he could go to it, but that he must remain in it and not "go conjurin' round over the house."

Jeff readily agreed to this, and with the aid of old Peter he got up-stairs with less pain than he had expected. In fact, he came to the conclusion that his injuries amounted to no more than natural lameness arising from his fall against the bridge.

Peter showed him into the room, and was unusually cordial for him. If Jeff was to pay for his accommodations it behooved Peter to use him well. He called attention to the bed, and then went below again.

The boy looked curiously around. The room was of good size, but furnished with utmost economy. The floor was without a carpet; the walls without pictures; the whole room without a thing in the way of ornament; and only the bed, a bureau and two chairs went to break the monotony of the scene.

This was plainness with a vengeance.

Jeff approached the window and looked out. He could see eighty acres of as fine meadow-land as was to be found for forty miles around, and all was the property of Peter Nichols. He had other land, too, but a million dollars would

not have made him other than what he was—a miser, and the meanest man in Joggle Meadow.

"The air of the house is stifling," thought Jeff, "but now that I am here I will endure it. If Nichols don't find out who I am, something may come of it. I must see Mrs. Nichols again, and if I can get her to talking I may be able to get at the old man's secret. I hope he won't get at mine. I really believe he and his sister would not hesitate to kill me if they knew why I am here."

A gentle rap sounded at the door.

"Come in!" he directed.

The door softly opened and some one entered. It was Sadie, the orphan girl.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD PETER IS ANXIOUS.

SADIE bore a small bouquet of wild flowers in her hand, and they were not sweeter than her own gentle face, but she laid her fingers upon her lips as she came in, to ask him to be silent.

Jeff nodded and smiled.

"Don't let them know I am here," cautioned the child, "for they would be very angry; but I thought perhaps you would like these flowers. They ain't very choice, but they were all I could get."

"They are very pretty and fresh, and I thank you a dozen times," replied Jeff, quickly. "I like flowers—do you?"

"Yes, very much. Lucy Wells has a whole, big garden full of them, and I wish I had, but—but—"

"Peter Nichols won't let you raise them, will he?"

"No."

"Do you like to live here, Sadie?"

The girl looked startled.

"You won't tell them?" she asked.

"No, indeed."

"I don't like here. I can't please them;" and the sigh which followed spoke louder than words.

"Your father and mother are dead, ain't they?"

"Yes;" and her lips quivered as she spoke.

"Has Peter Nichols adopted you?"

"No; I only live here."

"And work hard? I wonder, though, that Nichols ever took you. You were too young to do much work when you came here—but I suppose he looked ahead."

"He is my nearest relative, and he took me when my folks died. He said it was from charity, but I wish he hadn't done it; I don't think I am so very bad, but he and Miss Betsey beat me."

Her meek eyes sparkled for a moment and her small hand clinched, but the exhibition of spirit soon passed.

"How do you bear it?" cried Jeff, indignant, but Sadie at once made a warning gesture.

"Don't; they will hear you."

"Sadie," the boy earnestly resumed, "do you know where Nichols keeps his papers?—written documents, I mean."

"No."

"Haven't you ever seen any?"

"No."

"But they must have some."

"I suppose so, but they are very careful when I am around. I know nothing about their business, and Mr. Nichols and Miss Betsey never speak of private matters when I am around; and they won't let Mrs. Nichols speak."

"They are hard people."

The girl only answered with a sigh.

"I must go now," she said, after a pause. "Don't let them see the flowers; they would be very angry if they knew I had been in to see you."

"They sha'n't know it. Don't you get discouraged, Sadie, for folks often find friends when they least expect them. It may be so with you."

The child went out hastily as footsteps sounded below. Then Nichols came up. Jeff concealed the flowers, and was lying upon the bed when the old miser entered.

"How're you gettin' along?" Peter asked, looking at him sharply.

"I'm a bit easier, sir."

"You're a pretty brave boy, I reckon."

"I've got enough of fightin'," answered Jeff, who did not want Nichols to think him of an adventurous nature.

"I wish you'd captured them robbers."

"So do I, sir."

"The scoundrels stole a letter o' mine when the post-office was robbed."

"So I heard."

"What do folks at Jericho say about my let-

ter? Here at Joggle Me'dder we don't git much news."

"They will try to find the letter, Mr. Nichols."

"Think it valer'ble, eh?"

"Registered letters usually are, sir."

"Do they pretend ter know what was in my letter? Hey?"

Old Peter had got around to ask his question bluntly, and his sharp little eyes twinkled surprisingly.

"Nobody knows," Jeff answered.

"Folks will guess, sometimes."

"Yes."

"Do they guess?" asked Peter, pertinaciously.

"Oh! they know it was money, but they don't know how much," replied Jeff, shrewdly.

Nichols chuckled.

"Hum! Hal! They do, eh? What's your name?"

"Jeff Flicker."

"You work in the stable, hey?"

"Yes, sir."

"Like it?"

"None too well."

"Say, I need a likely boy on my farm, a good, strong, honest boy, who can keep his mouth shut. You don't want the place. Hey?"

"If you mean business, Mr. Nichols," replied Jeff, trying to hide his sudden satisfaction, "I'd like to talk with you when I get well. I should like to work on a farm."

"I must have a boy; a good, faithful, prudent boy, who can keep his mouth shut. A hired boy shouldn't tell all he knows. Hey?"

"Certainly not."

Peter rubbed his hands.

"We'll talk o' this later—when I think it over. Perhaps you are just the boy I want—only ye must work cheap."

"Naturally, a boy can't earn so much as a man."

"Sertain not; o' course not. 'Twould be absurd for a boy ter ask as much as a man. Hey?"

"You are right."

"Just so—just so. But if I hired a boy cheap, and found he could earn more, I'd pay it to him; oh! I would pay him all he earned. I'm a fair man."

Jeff looked at the miserable, would-be wily old rascal in deep disgust, but managed to reply:

"No doubt."

"Now, about them robbers, Jeff."

"What about them?"

"You heerd them speak plain, hey?"

"Yes."

"Would you know their voices ag'in?"

"I think so."

"Did they mention me?"

"Yes."

Old Peter started perceptibly, and his sordid face grew more anxious than ever.

"They did, hey? They mentioned me, eh? Come, come, what did they say about me?"

Jeff Flicker assumed an air of candor and made answer:

"I didn't hear all, and what I did hear was rather broken, but I gained the idea that they had, by stealing your letter, secured some written document of importance."

It was an experimental remark, but it worked well. Old Peter's face grew gray, and his lower jaw drooped until it seemed in danger of falling off. For a few moments he stared straight at Jeff in a frightened, motionless way; then he wriggled his body until every joint and muscle seemed in insurrection against its neighbors.

"Hal! That so? They did, hey? Hang it! they lied! They don't know. Liars, all of 'em!"

He smote his hand upon his knee viciously.

"They lied, by perdition!"

Jeff experienced a feeling of great satisfaction. The old miser's whole manner betrayed the fact that he was lying; as well as that he was startled.

"Of course," Jeff returned, "I placed no reliance in what they said."

"You did right; jest right. Never believe sech mean, dishonest chaps. Men that will steal will lie, an' I know it. Say, you ain't told nobody 'bout this?"

"No."

"Hal! Good, good! It would be very wrong for you to tell; it would get false stories goin'. See! Hey?"

"Oh! I see," Jeff agreed.

"An' you won't tell?"

"It isn't for me to tell, Mr. Nichols. It is your affair, and you can tell or not, just as you wish. You and Fitch will have to manage the robbers, only, of course, if I get a chance to capture them, I should be glad to do it."

"That's right; jest right. You're a fine boy. I like a boy who can keep his mouth shut."

"I think I can be sharp when I try," replied Jeff, with double meaning which Nichols did not suspect.

"You have done well, an' ef you keep it up, I'll see you well rewarded. There ain't nobody who rewards their friends better than I do."

Nichols tried to beam benevolently, and, evidently satisfied, withdrew from the room.

Shortly after the Jericho doctor arrived, accompanied by a man who was acting in place of Fitch, the constable.

The doctor made an examination and announced that, in his opinion, Jeff's injury was slight. When flung over his horse's head the boy had struck upon one of the sleepers of the bridge. This accounted for the pain and lameness in his side, but there was nothing to show that any bones were broken, or that he was badly hurt.

Fitch's deputy reported that the robbers had for the time escaped, but that Fitch hoped to get them yet; that the removal of the bridge planks was, no doubt, a trick of theirs done on their way to Jericho to foil pursuit; that Jeff's horse had been found, unhurt; and that he, the deputy, was ready to carry Jeff back to Jericho.

Jeff thanked him, but said that, for the present he would remain at Joggle Meadow. When he had in a measure recovered, he would return, but that at that time he did not feel like making the journey.

So he remained.

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING TO BE SOLD.

LATE in the afternoon, Constable Fitch called at Nichols's house. He went to Jeff's room, and, without much regard for secrecy, advised him to go back to Jericho village at once; adding that the air of Peter Nichols's house was poisonous, and that the less he breathed it, the better it would be for him.

Jeff quietly declined to leave, but he did not give his true reason. Far from it. He told Fitch that he was not in condition to make the journey, and that "as the family were kind" to him, he might as well be there as anywhere.

This was for the ears of a chance listener, and he felt almost positive that either Miss Betsey or Peter was listening.

The boy fell in the constable's estimation then, for that worthy man was disgusted.

If he had known Jeff Flicker's real motive it would have been very different. The boy might have said:

"I am here to accomplish a great object—to perform a sacred duty. I am not satisfied here—far from it. I am risking great danger by being here, for I am not sure but if Peter and his sister knew all they would try to kill me."

All this was in Jeff's mind, but he said nothing about it. Even if there had been no danger of spies and listeners, he would not have been so foolish as to speak. He must do his work alone, if at all, and if he made no confidant, no one could betray him.

When Fitch went away, Nichols intercepted him. He wanted to talk about the post-office robbers.

There was little to be told.

The constable and his party had made as sharp pursuit as was possible, but the robbers had escaped. Fitch was not in very good humor while explaining. The men had escaped him in a way which he could not understand, and though he had sent several telegrams, none had had the effect of heading them off.

Consequently he was perplexed and angry.

Once more he tried to learn what had been in Peter's stolen letter, and when he was again met with a curt refusal, he grew more angry, and after a few plain words to the old miser, he abruptly entered his carriage and drove away.

Night fell. The evening wore away.

Jeff Flicker kept his room, but he was free to admit to himself that he was nearly as well as ever. He felt no more pain, and the lameness in his side was decreasing. He might well have left Nichols's, but he preferred to remain and gain a hold upon the old miser's regard, if nothing more.

Sadie Pickett came in for a few minutes during the evening, but her fear of the old folks caused her to cut her visit short.

Jeff sat at the window and looked out at the wide meadow, the winding brook, the few trees near the road and the frowning sky. The night was dark, for clouds had rolled up against the heavens. There was abundant promise of rain.

Suddenly he heard a sound not before audible.

"Some one rapping at the door," he thought. The sound was repeated.

Then he heard the outer door opened.

"Rather late for a call," he murmured. "It's at least half-past nine, and people in Joggle Meadow usually retire before that hour. I wonder who it is."

He did wonder; he began to feel a curiosity borne of the peculiar circumstances under which he was at Peter Nichols's house.

What would ordinarily have been a very insignificant matter now interested him greatly.

A desire to know who the visitor was assailed him, as did the resolution to know. The only way in which he could do this was to go down the stairs, openly or secretly. He meditated. He believed that all the household had retired except one person. This was either Peter or Miss Betsey; he did not know which.

For awhile he was uncertain; then he arose, opened the door of his room and listened. He could hear the murmur of voices. He glided from the room.

His shoes had already been removed, and his stocking feet gave forth no betraying sound. He cautiously descended the stairs.

Reaching the bottom he found himself in a space four feet square. Two doors opened from it, one of which led to a closet, and the other to the kitchen. In the latter room the conversation was going on, but he could hear only indistinctly.

Carefully he opened the door a trifle. Luckily, no betraying sound was thus made. He had gained a view of the kitchen.

He could see Nichols sitting in a chair at one side, but the other person was not visible. Conversation, however, became distinct enough.

"It don't matter who I am," the unknown was saying—it was a steady, masculine voice—but I can easily convince you I mean business. There! there! don't be alarmed—I'm an honest man, like you."

"Ef you wa'n't, there ain't nothin' here ter steal."

"I am not a thief."

"Glad on't."

Peter evidently meant what he said, but his fears were not yet wholly removed. He had a nervous air not to be mistaken; he was afraid of his visitor.

"I don't understand your roundabout way o' doin' business," he peevishly added.

"I'll come right to the point," the stranger replied. "I have something to sell; I want a purchaser."

"I can't buy; I have no money."

"Nonsense! You're the richest man in Joggle Meadow, Peter."

"It's a lie; I'm poor!" snapped the old man.

"Morally, you are, no doubt; financially, you are well fixed," was the cool reply. "But don't rush things so, Peter: hear what I have to sell. Papers, Peter, papers!"

Nichols started.

"Papers?" he echoed.

"Written, and other documents."

Nichols's clasped hands trembled, and he bent forward and looked at his visitor with feverish anxiety.

"What papers?"

"Somebody's last will and testament, for instance."

The old man's face grew gray.

"What is this ter me?" he asked, tremulously.

"Possibly, nothing; but there are those who could afford to pay a good price for Somebody's will."

"Why don't you go ter them?"

"With your leave, Peter, I will."

The stranger rose, but Nichols spoke hastily.

"No, no; set down. I didn't mean it. This will—how did you git it?"

"Saved from the wreck, possibly."

"Stolen, more likely."

"We won't argue the point," was the cool, business-like answer. "The point at issue is, I want to sell Somebody's will. Do you care to buy?"

"Suppose," answered Nichols, slowly, "that I should call help an' say, Here is the post-office robber! What would you do?"

"It" was the calm reply. "Why, I would break your head, and then go and sell Somebody's will to one who would know enough to appreciate it."

"But ef you was ketched?"

"If I was 'ketched?' Well, I assure you I would not be 'ketched.' Do you think I am a fool? Do you suppose I came here like a blind man? Don't let your fertile imagination run

away with you, Peter. You are rather a sharp old fellow. Prove it now."

"Do you admit that you be the post-office robber?"

"I admit nothing."

"But you claim ter hev what was in the letter stole from me—don't you?"

"See here, my man," was the sharp response, "I am not going to have you put any words in my mouth. I won't use them. Take my words, or go without any. We have fooled around long enough; let us come to business now. I hold Somebody's will, and certain other papers, which I want to sell. Do you want to buy?"

It was plain that the speaker meant all that he asserted; he was resolved to come to business, and was not a man to be trifled with by any one.

Jeff Flicker was listening eagerly to every word, and he found it of vital interest. He knew, too, that the visitor was not wandering at random. In every way Nichols showed that he was frightened and distressed.

The visitor had interested him well.

By that time Jeff had gained view of the stranger, but it conveyed nothing to his mind; he did not recognize the man. Old Peter's words had led him to recognize one of the post-office robbers, but he could see no resemblance.

Answering the last question, Nichols returned:

"I don't know how I am ter buy. I am a poor man, an' money is skeerce—"

"Don't lie, Peter; you are rich."

The miser threw up his hands in reproach.

"Rich!" he shrilly cried. "How very wrong. I am 'most as poor as a town pauper—"

"How much money did you get from Somebody's estate?" was the sharp question.

"Well, when it was divided among the other heirs—"

"There was no such division; you got all. There was, you remember, *no will!*"

The marked significance of these words was not to be mistaken.

"Somebody," continued the speaker, "left twenty thousand dollars, all of which went to one Peter Nichols— Be silent, sir! Hear me out. Before this you had at least five thousand dollars—and now you talk of poverty! Bah! you old rascal, I am not to be deceived. Don't try it—don't lie to me, Peter!"

The speaker paused for a moment, leaned forward in his chair and impressively added:

"Now, do you want to buy Somebody's will?"

CHAPTER XI.

TRAILING THE STRANGER.

PETER NICHOLS squirmed uneasily about in his chair. He began to realize that his former line of talk was folly, but he was a most miserable man. He wanted "Somebody's" will—oh! how badly he wanted it!—but the idea of parting with his precious money to secure it made him writhe in agony, literally as well as figuratively.

"How much do you want for it?" he asked.

"Five thousand dollars!"

Peter threw up both hands again.

"What?" he cried.

"Not a cent less."

"You are mad—mad!" Nichols tremulously affirmed, looking liable to burst into tears.

"What's the racket, Old Hundred?" was the sneering reply. "Does your money-bag tremble?"

"I'll never give you any such sum."

"No?"

"Never!"

"All right; then I'll go to the party in whose favor the will is made."

And the visitor again rose.

"Wait, wait!" cried Nichols.

"No. My business is done here."

"But I—I want that will."

"All right. Pass over five thousand dollars."

"But I haven't got it—indeed, I haven't. It is more than all my worldly possessions combined."

"Fool!" cried the stranger, with sudden fierceness, "do you take me to be so weak-headed as you are? I know every point in this case. When the old man died you were heir-at-law, and inherited all; but you knew, and everybody knew, that the property was not rightfully yours. He had left a will, giving the whole business to somebody he liked a good deal better than you."

"This will could not be found; it was not found, despite all the desperate efforts to do so. Now what was its real fate? Your cunning brain solved the mystery. You learned that a box of old books belonging to a former resident of the town, long stored for him by

Mr. Paxraven, had been shipped to him at his new home in Michigan when Paxraven died.

"You decided that the will must have been concealed in the box, and you employed a Chicago firm of lawyers—Markin & Toohey; the latter being an old friend of yours—to investigate. They did so and the will was found, but—you haven't got it yet."

"Other persons came into the game. You were terribly afraid of losing the will—and the other papers—and you directed Markin & Toohey to send it on a specified date. You rarely go to Jericho post-office, and you didn't want the package to lie there over night."

"Other persons had an eye open; a telegram, purporting to be from you, was sent to Markin & Toohey, directing them to forward the package one day earlier than before agreed; the package was sent, and when the post-office was robbed, it fell into the hands of those who had sent the bogus telegram."

"How dare you come here ter make terms with me?" suddenly, shrilly cried Nichols.

"Well, what is chewing you now?" the visitor asked.

"You have betrayed the fact that you be one o' the post-office robbers."

"What of it?"

"How dare you make terms? You are a robber—"

"Oh! you tire me, Nichols; you weary me beyond expression," affirmed the stranger, in a tone of disgust. "You are on the barb of the hook, like a fish, yet you *will* squirm. More fool you! You *dare* not betray me—mind, I have confessed nothing—for in that case I would produce Paxraven's will, and your fortune would be swept away from you."

"Monster!" groaned Nichols.

"I have gone over the case at full length," pursued the visitor, wholly unmoved, "to show you that I know *all*. Now, when you prate of poverty, you lie—that's all. You got twenty thousand dollars from old Paxraven's estate. Now, will you give five thousand for Paxraven's will, or shall I carry it to some other purchaser?"

The stranger leaned back in his chair and waited patiently for his answer.

Jeff Flicker was not so calm. The boy had been well paid for leaving his room. For a year he had been upon a certain trail; he was now very close to the game.

He had no money to win or lose by means of Paxraven's will, but he was none the less eager to find it—to deprive Peter Nichols of the money he unjustly held.

The boy's eyes glittered like living coals.

He had made a resolution, and that was to do his best to learn who this mysterious visitor was.

Peter was equally excited, but in a far different way. He wiped the unnatural perspiration from his forehead, and his mean, sordid face seemed to grow more pinched and haggard.

"You are a hard man," he lamented, looking piteously at the stranger.

"Not a bit. I have an article to sell, and I have my price. You can buy, or leave it alone."

"But the price is exorbitant."

"Indeed."

"It is too much."

"Then don't buy."

"But I want the—the article."

The stranger said nothing. He drummed lightly upon the table with his fingers, and seemed in the best possible spirits.

Nichols returned to the attack, his object being to lessen the visitor's price. A long wrangle ensued. Nichols began by offering an insignificant price, and then the argument went on. The old man lowered himself to the depths of humbleness; he implored mercy upon himself—and his pocket-book—and actually shed tears at the idea of parting with any portion of his wealth.

The result proved that the stranger had wisely set his price high, for, after a long wrangle, he agreed to part with the will for three thousand dollars.

Not a cent lower would he go.

At last Nichols heaved a disconsolate sigh.

"Wal, I'll give it," he almost groaned.

"Wise man!"

"Have you the will here?"

"No."

"When can I hev it?"

"When your money is ready."

"I can't hev it before Thursday evenin'."

"Forty-eight hours hence. That will do."

"Will you bring the will here?"

The stranger looked keenly at the miser. Some fears of treachery were in his mind. Miss Betsey was as strong as a man, and as evil as

any person, male or female. It would be very like the pair to try foul play.

He decided to risk it, however.

"Yes," he replied, with assumed carelessness. "I will come Thursday evening at nine o'clock. Have the money ready, and you can have the will."

At the last words he arose to go.

Unfortunately, Jeff Flicker did not hear this appointment. The boy, acting according to the best of his judgment, had made one mistake.

Intending to follow the stranger, it had occurred to him that the only way to do this was to be outside the house and waiting when the man came out.

This seemed a wise step to take, and really was, yet he lost the chance of hearing the appointment then.

While the wrangle was going on he left his place of concealment, lowered himself from the window of his own room to the lean-to below by means of an impromptu rope made of the bed-clothes; then, leaping to the ground, was soon near the front of the house. He still had his revolver, and though he hoped there would be no necessity for using it, he held it close in his hand.

When the stranger came out, Jeff was ready for work.

With a curt parting word to Nichols, the masked man moved away.

Jeff followed.

The boy did not underrate the difficulty of the task he had set for himself, nor was he sanguine of success. The extreme darkness was in his favor, since it would hide his movements, but if, as he expected, the stranger had a team near at hand, his attempt seemed sure to come to naught.

Nevertheless, he followed.

The stranger took the road, and Jeff took the field. A low hedge was for the time between them, and by stooping a little, Jeff was wholly concealed from view. This would not long be the case, and he expected a change not in his favor.

Joggle Meadow was not a large place, and when once beyond the village, difficulties would probably multiply.

Keeping at a safe distance he went on, availing himself of every means of shelter by the way. The stranger was duly careful, and often looked around to see if any pursuer was visible, but he did not give the attention to the field that it deserved.

The evening had rolled on until it was nearly eleven o'clock, and, according to the fashion of country places, nearly all of Joggle Meadow had for some time been wrapped in slumber.

The little hotel, however, was still open, and when the stranger reached that point he calmly entered.

Jeff paused in surprise. Could it be that the man was openly stopping there?

"Not by a good deal!" muttered Jeff, after a moment's meditation. "He has only put up his horse there for awhile—though I wouldn't suppose he would dare do that."

The boy glanced at the shed back of the hotel. In that place there was room to tie a dozen horses, and the space was usually well patronized of evenings, though how it was then he could not tell.

"I'll watch a bit," he decided.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STRATEGIC STRANGER.

JEFF FLICKER settled himself comfortably down near a large tree opposite to the hotel, prepared to watch and think. He was just then considering whether he had sufficient proof to go in, denounce the stranger as one of the post-office robbers, and demand his seizure; but as he had not been able to detect any resemblance between him and the men he had seen in the Jericho stable, he was not disposed to be precipitate.

A man came out of the hotel.

"Another stranger!" murmured Jeff.

The person in question was a tall, slender man in a Prince Albert coat and a tall hat. He left the hotel, and walked carelessly toward the shed.

"Get a team in there, I reckon," thought Jeff.

The speaker looked after him thoughtfully.

"Where have I seen that man before?" he wondered. "There is something familiar about him, but I can't place him. Odd, by gracious! Here he comes again."

The tall man drove out of the shed and took the road that led to Jericho village.

Jeff gazed after him with the puzzled expres-

sion still on his face, but suddenly sprung to his feet.

"By heavens!" he cried aloud, "it was the stranger!"

For a moment the boy stood in startled wonder; then he ran to the hotel stable. The hostler was cleaning off a horse which had just come in.

"Tom!" cried Jeff, "clap a saddle upon your best horse, and give it to me in a twinkling."

The hostler stood amazed. He knew Jeff well, and there had often been professional favors granted by his stable and that at the main village of Jericho, but he was now descended upon in a rather alarming way.

"Hustle!" exclaimed Jeff; and then he proceeded to "hustle" on his own account.

Springing to the freshest looking horse in the lot, he backed the animal out of the stall.

"Is it all right, Tom?" he continued.

"Of course, if you say so; but what is the racket, anyhow? Is anybody sick, or—"

"I'll tell you later."

Jeff rode out of the stable as he spoke. He had not stopped for a saddle, but, slipping on a bridle, mounted the horse and started, buckling the throat-latch as he went. Reaching the road, he galloped after the stranger, the nature of the road enabling him to ride at full speed without making any great noise.

Much sooner than he had expected, he caught sight of his man. He had not quite reached Peter Nichols's house when he saw the tall man's team just entering the covered bridge.

The pursued moderated the pace of his horse. By that time he knew that he had to deal with a shrewd man. The incident at the hotel had proved that. The stranger had entered the hotel wearing a slouch hat, light-colored sack-coat and a heavy mustache. He came out wearing a tall hat and black Prince Albert, and his mustache had disappeared.

He had not been gone long enough to make these changes in any of the up-stairs guests' rooms; so, Jeff reasoned, the wily stranger had not run the risk of hiring a room at all, but, probably avoiding the danger of drawing any attention to himself, had made his changes in some retired place.

They had been made with great celerity, too.

Dealing with such a man it became necessary to use great care, and the pursuer was not reckless enough to follow him in a headlong way.

Events soon showed him how well he had decided.

Suddenly the noise of the team made in its passage over the bridge ceased, yet it had not emerged from the covered space.

Jeff drew his horse out of the road.

"Another trick?" he wondered.

Suddenly, and after the briefest possible delay, the sounds on the bridge were resumed, and he saw the marked team emerge at the further side.

Jeff resumed his own advance. Just as he reached the bridge he was surprised to see a second team come out, moving his way. He favored the other traveler with a sharp glance. There was little to be discovered about the man in the darkness, except that he had a full beard and wore a Derby hat; but the horse was not one easily forgotten. It was principally dark-colored, but had four or five large white spots. As the dark shade was not black, this made it a horse not easily forgotten.

The driver did not seem to favor Jeff with so much as a glance, but the boy was not indifferent.

"What's up now?" he thought. "I didn't see that man drive upon the bridge, and it's very funny he should come out at one end just as my game did at the other. Can it be they are accomplices?"

His mind went back to the stranger's interview with Nichols, and for a moment he suspected that the will of Paxraven had actually been handed over to Nichols, and the money received for it just transferred to the man with the spotted horse.

This idea was discarded as soon as developed. Plainly, Nichols did not have money enough on hand to buy Paxraven's will.

The old miser would not let any such sum lie idle when it might be drawing interest.

"Whoever this fellow is, I mustn't let him draw me away from my game," decided Jeff. "I'll go on!"

He crossed the bridge. The team he had followed from the hotel was going on toward Jericho in a quiet way, as though the driver had unlimited time before him. Jeff followed a hundred yards, and then something peculiar happened.

The man with the tall hat began to whistle.

In itself this was not strange, but Jeff noted something peculiar, nevertheless. He started; looked eagerly at the driver; listened attentively; and ended by galloping ahead until he reached the vehicle.

Then a painful discovery was made.

The person in the vehicle wore a tall hat, and the horse and carriage were the same that had left the hotel-shed, but the driver was not the man he wanted; it was a young fellow of Jericho; an honest, rather simple-minded youth well-known to Jeff.

Another trick of the strategic stranger was revealed.

Somehow, he had exchanged identities with the young man, and had not the latter taken to whistling in a very familiar way, Jeff might have gone on following him clear to Jericho.

Amazed and dismayed, Jeff cried out sharply:

"Alf, what are you doing?"

"Goin' home," was the placid reply.

"Where did you git that team?"

"This is ours: father bought it a few days ago. I've had a queer experience to-night. Dye see this 'ere hat?"

He took off his head-covering as he spoke.

"Yes; where did you get it?"

"From a man who tol' me ter wear it to Jericho, an' of all the queer things—"

"Tell me all about it."

"Alf's" way of speaking was usually a very slow way, but Jeff, burning with impatience, now worked him so zealously that the story was soon told.

A strange story it was.

Alf stated that he had been hired by a stranger to do a piece of work which still bewildered him, but to which he was vaguely reconciled. This man had received from him his—Alf's—team, and left in its place his own.

Then, by his direction, Alf drove the spotted horse to the bridge and awaited the coming of his employer; and, when he did come, they again changed teams, each receiving his own.

Alf also put on the tall hat which the stranger had worn, while the stranger assumed a black Derby which he had carried in his vehicle.

Then they separated and each went his way.

The change had been quickly made, all being arranged in advance, but simple-minded Alf admitted that, when the bargain was made, it had taken him a long time to see what was wanted of him, and that he was still bewildered.

Jeff Flicker was not bewildered; he saw all clearly.

Through all the intricacies of this strange affair shone the cunning of the stranger.

Believing that when he left Peter Nichols's he would be followed, he resolved that the pursuit should not be successful. His first step—planned in advance—had been to make the changes in his dress at the hotel. Determined to make assurance doubly certain he had gone on to the next artifice—also pre arranged—and made the double exchange on the bridge.

But why had he made Alf a confederate?

Why had he not used a friend of his own?

Jeff also understood this. If he had had one of his friends at the bridge that man would have been followed—if there was any pursuit—and his secret endangered as much as though he was himself followed.

Having selected Alf for his blind confederate, he removed all such danger. If Alf was followed to Jericho no trouble would result; once at Jericho the pursuer would be as much in the dark as ever.

And Alf was not bright enough to be dangerous.

Cunning, indeed, had the stranger been, but his scheme had received a check at the very start from a singularly simple cause.

Alf had whistled.

Had not Jeff Flicker recognized that peculiar sound he would have gone on to Jericho in harmless, unavailing pursuit, and his work would have been thrown away.

As it was, one hope remained; the hope of again getting sight of the stranger.

He wheeled his horse.

"Good-night!" he cried, to amazed Alf; and in a moment more he was galloping toward Joggle Meadow again.

He soon reached the bridge. There he paused for a moment. Flinging himself to the ground he lighted a match and held it close to the ground. His purpose was soon served; he wanted to see the footprints of the spotted horse, and as it was the last horse to leave the bridge, he distinguished them without any doubt on his part.

Springing again upon the back of his own horse, he resumed his way.

Until the further side of the settlement was reached he went at a gallop. There the road "forked." He sprung down again, lighted another match and looked for the footprints. He found them without trouble, and then resumed his way along "the north road."

He no longer went at headlong speed, however; the distance between the spotted horse's tracks had told him that it was not being urged greatly, and he did not want to come upon the stranger in a way to arouse suspicion.

"Slow and careful is the way," thought the pursuer. "I am dealing with a very sharp man, and if I win the game I have got to do some head-work, myself."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONSPIRATORS AT HOME.

THE pursuer rode on, keeping sharp watch for the stranger, and seeking to sight him as soon as was practicable.

Jeff's every sense was on the alert. Possibly the unknown's artifices were not yet over, and he would soon lose the clew entirely.

He had begun to admire his opponent a good deal, and through all crept a fixed idea. He decided that the unknown did not live any great ways from Jericho; his choice of Alf as an ally proved that. No other person in the town would have served his purpose so well as Alf, for the reason that no one else was so simple-minded. The man who, being obliged to make a choice, had selected Alf, had been well acquainted in Jericho.

These meditations were suddenly interrupted.

"The north road" led to higher land, and the way was winding, narrow and bordered with bushes. Reaching one of these bends Jeff suddenly stopped his horse.

A few yards ahead was a fountain of water, and by the road was a trough for the accommodation of man and beast. By this trough was a team, and the driver was standing on the ground. More than this, he was engaged in some work which at first puzzled the pursuer.

The latter backed his horse out of sight, and then crept forward as far as he dared.

The occupation of the other traveler became plain.

He was washing off his horse.

Jeff knit his brows in perplexity, for he saw that this was no careless application, but a thorough drenching, made, he believed, with a sponge. Odd fact! But suddenly light flashed upon the boy.

Again the strategic unknown!

And on this occasion he was *washing the white spots off his brown horse*; the white spots had been no more than a cunning disguise—they were merely *painted* spots—and, now that he was clear of the village, he was removing the last telltale clew to his identity.

It was one more sharp trick.

"Great head that fellow has got!" thought Jeff, "and I'd never have discovered him if Alf had not whistled. I'd have gone straight on to Jericho after the wrong man, slow and cautious. As it is—aha! Mister Sharper, I am not yet beaten!"

Smiling grimly he lay back in the bushes and waited.

The stranger worked steadily, and took great care to remove all of the white paint. He seemed safe enough. He was on a little-traveled road, and the hour was past midnight. There was little danger that any one would come along, it seemed.

He was done at last, and, flinging his sponge into the carriage, he agilely regained his seat, whistled cheerily to his horse and moved away.

"If I ain't greatly in error, you are near your home base, mister," muttered Jeff, grimly, "and I don't think I need fear any more of your sharp tricks. If I can keep out of your sight for awhile, I may be able to win the game, after all."

There was a good deal of satisfaction in having met and defeated all of the stranger's stratagems, though Jeff was frank enough to admit that he owed his advantage to the fact that "Alf" had whistled.

Except for this fact the stratagem of the bridge would have succeeded.

Jeff now bent all his energies to the task of keeping the stranger ignorant of the fact that he was pursued.

They went on for a mile quietly.

At the end of that distance a house was reached, and the unknown drove into the yard.

Jeff stopped well back and waited.

A light was burning in the house, and a man at once came out and greeted the stranger. Evidently the latter had been expected. He had sprung to the ground, and the two men began

to take the horse from the carriage. Jeff led his own animal to a retired place in the sparsely-wooded field close at hand, secured him and moved toward the house.

He had a definite object in view.

He knew that the man who lived in the house was named Atwood, and believed that it was he who had come out to assist the stranger. Such being the case, it looked as though he was knowing to the stranger's plots. If he was, an interesting conversation was likely to ensue, and Jeff wished to hear it.

Reaching the vicinity of the house he made an examination of the place. No person was then in the kitchen. The windows were all up, and he soon decided that if a conversation was held there he had a good chance to hear it.

He soon selected his position.

It was at one end of the main building, where a second building "cornered" with it, and a heavy wagon stood close at hand. He thought this most welcome shelter, and, later, he had occasion to test it.

Atwood and the stranger soon returned from the stable, and as the master of the house closed the door, he spoke abruptly:

"Well, what luck?"

"Good!"

The stranger answered, with cool brevity.

"Have you seen Nichols?"

"Yes."

"I'll bet you didn't bring him to terms."

"Don't bet; you'll lose, At."

With this nonchalant reply the stranger sat down, lighted a fragrant cigar, elevated his feet to a second chair, and then settled down with an air of calm repose.

"Do you mean to say that he succumbed?"

"He succumbed!"

"And will buy the will?"

"Yes."

"At what price?"

"Three thousand."

The stranger blew a wreath of smoke carelessly upward toward the ceiling.

"Three thousand dollars out of Old Pete Nichols!" echoed Atwood, in wonder. "Well, you are a cool one, Benway!"

"My dear At, I have not been to school all these years for nothing. In the School of Knavery I have taken all degrees, and there are few who can beat me. Having set out to beat the worthy Mr. Nichols, I am going to do it."

"Don't be too sure," thought the spy at the window.

"Did Pete try to learn who you were?" continued Atwood.

"Yes."

"And you declined to tell?"

"Naturally."

"Perhaps he followed you here?"

Benway blew another wreath of smoke and, closing one eye, watched it critically before he replied.

"Perhaps he didn't," he finally returned. "At, you do violence to my character as a knave when you insinuate such a thing. Do you suppose I could sleep o' nights hereafter if I allowed myself to be overreached by a hayseed farmer? Hardly! I went prepared for counter-strokes, and I fancy I prevented any."

He then described the means he had taken to prevent being followed.

"You've got a long head!" Atwood exclaimed.

"No. I did nothing remarkable; I only used the common sense any man might use if he would. Possibly, though, few men possess horse-sense, but I, a graduate of the School of Knavery, have to possess and use the article. I am not done yet."

"And you won't be," replied Atwood, with the air of a man anxious to show that he is sharp-witted, "until Nichols has Paxraven's will, and you have the three thousand dollars."

Benway blew another wreath of smoke.

"Nichols will never have Paxraven's will," he calmly observed.

"What?"

"Never!"

"Then you are not going to sell—"

"Thursday evening, at nine o'clock, Providence permitting, I am going to pass over to him a document, and receive for it three thousand dollars. The document will not be the will. My dear At, you mean well, but you don't know what respect is due me as a graduate of the School of Knavery."

"Egad! you're too deep for me," Atwood muttered, in bewilderment.

"I am shallow—dreadfully shallow. A sharp man could see through all my little artifices. Nichols won't; he will be taken in. I shall sell b' a b'gus will, and then I shall take the gen-

wine will to the person in favor of whom Paxraven made the will, and sell it at a good figure to her!"

"To the child, Sadie Pickett?"

"To the child, Sadie Pickett."

Jeff Flicker heard, but was not astonished. He had known all along that Sadie was the person to whom Paxraven's money ought to go; and it was to try and help her, and to perform a sacred duty, that he was in Jericho.

"She has no money to pay you," urged Atwood.

"Depend upon me to find a way," was the calm reply. "A genuine article will always bring money if it is valuable. This *bona fide* will is at present concealed, but when I go to see Nichols I shall give it to you, to bring to me a few hours later."

"Well, I must say you are doing quite a stroke of business; I should never know you for the boy who went West to seek his fortune ten years ago. But I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, At. No doubt your wife, who is my esteemed sister, would be the same."

"Hardly," replied Atwood, uneasily. "She would be shocked, I suppose. It is well she is away."

"Just as well, and I'll see her before I drift West again. Just now we are not dealing with woman's scruples, but man's practical work. I have made a long journey in this matter of Paxraven's will, and I want it ended, so I can get back to the 'wild and woolly West.' Has our burglar been around?"

"No."

"Probably he won't come to-night."

"I think he will; he told me to expect him, sure."

"Then let him come. I want to settle with these fellows and be rid of them. I regret that I had to employ them at all, but, as you know, circumstances demanded it. They did the job on the post-office in good style, but I wouldn't have trusted them had they known the value of the Nichols letter. They are fools, anyway! Words can't condemn them too strongly for venturing back to Jericho just because one of the stupid fools lost a ring in Payson's livery-stables."

Here was light for Jeff Flicker.

"They were afraid the ring would turn up and put them in danger, some time," explained Atwood.

"And so," retorted Benway, sarcastically, "they proceeded to put themselves in danger at once!"

Jeff Flicker's attention wandered. He had heard a sound behind him like the breaking of a twig. He turned his head. On the other side of the wagon before mentioned stood a man who seemed to be trying to get a view of the room.

Something like dismay assailed the boy. The men in the room had mentioned an ally whom they expected—what was more likely than that the ally had come?

If so, Jeff was between two fires, figuratively speaking.

Suddenly the unknown started forward toward him.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW!"

JEFF FLICKER instantly became on the alert. Danger menaced him in all ways, but it was not physical danger that he had most to fear.

He had tracked the chief conspirator to his lair, and there he might be trapped if he could be kept ignorant of the fact that he was unmasked; but if it was known that a spy had been near, Benway would at once take to flight and the precious advantage would be lost.

The ally was coming closer, and something must be done at once.

Weak irresolution would surely lose the battle.

Jeff thought of Sadie Pickett—of the work he had long ago promised to do—and his courage arose at once.

He resolved to act boldly, and win or lose all.

His revolver, of which mention has before been made, had been in his pocket, but he now drew it quickly and left his covert with a quick, determined step.

The unknown man was advancing around the end of the wagon with his gaze fixed upon the window, ready to drop out of sight at the first sign of any one there, and oblivious of all other things.

Suddenly he started back.

His attention was suddenly shifted.

There in his path stood a human figure, and a revolver was pointed straight at his head.

"Be silent!" exclaimed Jeff, in a low but in-

tense voice; "be silent, or you are a dead man!"

It was a threat which he would not have dreamed of carrying into effect, but it was necessary to grasp and to hold the man's attention at the very start.

He did all that he hoped.

The man—whom he now recognized as "Bob," the burglar—was bold enough, but he was taken by surprise. He was alarmed, too. He could not see his opponent's face, but the light from the window fell upon Jeff's form plainly, even as it did on Bob's face.

"Move back!" ordered the boy. "You are safe if you obey me, but don't tempt me too far. I tell you to move back!"

The robber obeyed. He could understand the language of the revolver, as well as of the boy. He retreated backward until Jeff felt no fear that their voices would be audible in the room.

By that time Bob was beginning to regain his composure.

"What in perdition does this mean?" he growled, savagely.

"It means that you are my prisoner."

"Who are you?"

"That is not important."

"The dickens it ain't! It is to me."

"I will not harm you if you mind me."

"How kind!" sneered Bob.

"But if you disobey, I shall have to shoot you."

Jeff's confidence was increasing; he spoke in a cool, steady voice. A revolver makes a weak person the equal of a strong one, and he realized it then.

"Why would you shoot me?" Bob asked.

His quiet manner suggested to Jeff that trouble was brewing.

"I mean to have things my own way here," the boy firmly replied.

"Sort of a superintendent, eh?"

"By virtue of this revolver—yes."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"That part is not of consequence."

"Naturally, I can't blame you," responded Bob, in a most oily tone, "but, odd as it may seem, I—poor, insignificant chap that I am—I want a word to say—"

"Stop! Hold out your hands or I'll shoot!"

It was a sharp, keen command from Jeff. As Bob uttered his sneering words he had slyly passed one hand behind him, but Jeff had seen and understood the motion. Bob had a revolver in his hip-pocket, and he intended to wrest the advantage from Jeff's hands.

"Obey me!" the boy added. "I am not to be trifled with. Up with your hands!"

Bob sullenly obeyed.

"I'd like to know who you are, and what you want," he growled, savagely.

"You shall soon learn. Go out into the road!"

"I won't!"

"Then you will take the consequences. I warn you that I am not to be trifled with. Go!"

The rogue stared hard at his young opponent. If his face had been visible in the darkness, Jeff would have seen a most forbidding scowl upon it. Bob hated to be beaten, but he was sufficiently experienced to know the power of a revolver. He drew a deep breath, and expelled it from his lungs hissing.

"You are tackling a man dangerous to fool with," he said, in a hard voice.

"I am able to bear it."

"Are you a friend of the men in the house?"

"No matter."

"I have only to raise my voice and cry—"

"Raise it at your peril. Raise it—if you dare!"

"Well, what do you want, anyhow?"

"Go into the road—no; to yonder lot."

Jeff was growing cooler as time passed. He knew that Bob had not recognized him, and he did not believe that the robber knew he was dealing with one so young. In any case it would not do to let Bob escape. If he did, the alarm would at once be given, and then Benway, the head conspirator, would disappear—perhaps never to be seen again.

"I'll accommodate you," Bob replied, after a pause. "To the lot we go, and much good may it do you."

He was still far from being subdued, but he saw fit to yield a point. They went as Jeff directed, and then, before Bob realized its presence, the boy had his horse again.

"Now for the road," continued the young captor. "Pass on!"

"Anything to oblige you."

Bob answered mockingly. He was still ignorant of what was wanted of him, and he wished

his enemy to show his hand. If it proved that Jeff aspired to take him to Jericho, Bob would have something to say and do about it. Before he would submit to such a thing he would attack his opponent boldly, revolver or no revolver, and run the risk of getting a bullet in his body.

They reached the road.

"What next?" the robber grimly inquired.

What came next was not expected by either of them. A team suddenly loomed up in the darkness not twenty feet away. The soft earth of the road and their own movements had prevented them from hearing it before, while the bushes had screened it from their view.

Its appearance was a sensation, but it affected them in a dissimilar way. Bob started with some alarm, while Jeff Flicker, recognizing the driver, found his voice at once.

"Quick, Mr. Fitch!" he cried. "Give me help here. Stand still!—don't you dare to move!"

The last words were addressed to Bob, and they were sharp and emphatic to an extreme. All of Jeff's attention was now upon the man; all his alertness was in force; and he was determined to carry the matter to a successful issue.

"Quick, Mr. Fitch!" he again exclaimed. "I am Jeff Flicker, and here is one of the men you want. Don't let him escape!"

Luckily, Fitch was a clear-headed man, and, having recognized Jeff's voice at the start, he sprung from his carriage and took position by the boy. He also drew a revolver and stood ready for business.

"What's the racket?" he asked.

"That man is one of the post-office robbers."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then he's my game," the constable declared.

"Mister, put out your hands!"

"I won't!" Bob fiercely replied.

"You will, or I'll use my revolver. Do you want to be shot, or—"

"Look out!" cried Jeff; "he's after his revolver!"

Bob's hand had moved toward his pocket, but he had to deal with a man as bold, and much stronger, than himself. Fitch sprung forward and seized him, and in the struggle which followed, Jeff managed to secure the revolver in the robber's pocket.

The struggle was soon over, and then Bob was helpless; Fitch had deftly "ironed" him.

"I don't understand this a particle, Jeff," then admitted the constable, "but I trust that you do. Your head is usually level."

"I'll prove that it is now," Jeff modestly answered. "Go a hundred yards further, and then I will explain."

They went, and then Bob was secured to the carriage so that he could not run away, and Jeff gave the constable an insight to the case.

One Paxraven, a citizen of the town of Factory Hollow, had died leaving his property by will to his adopted daughter, a distant relative—the child, Sadie Pickett. This will was not found, and the property went to the next of kin, Peter Nichols. The latter, for some reason—probably to have a servant he need not pay, or to silence public talk—adopted Sadie.

The will, however, had been in existence; had been sent to Nichols by somebody; had been stolen from the post-office letter by Bob and his companion, at Benway's order; and then the latter had tried to raise money on it.

In addition to this Jeff told nearly all that had occurred that night, much to Fitch's surprise. His admiration of Jeff was strong.

"We will arrest Benway at once!" he cried.

"No, we will not," Jeff quietly answered.

CHAPTER XV.

THE NOCTURNAL GUIDE.

THE constable showed surprise.

"Not arrest him?" he echoed. "Why not?"

"Because we should spoil everything by doing so," Jeff replied. "As it is now, we have a decided advantage, but one false move may ruin all."

"Explain."

"We now have one of the post-office robbers; we know the plot, and who is at the bottom of it?"

"Yes."

"It is a matter of great importance that we get that will, isn't it?"

"Decidedly so," Fitch agreed. "It seems that old Pete Nichols has for years been holding what he knew was not his; that Paxraven's money really belongs to the child, Sadie Pickett."

"Just so; but in order to secure her rights we must produce the will."

"Yes."

"Now recall what I told you. Remember that I heard Benway say to Atwood that the will was hidden somewhere, but that when he went to Joggle Meadow to sell the bogus will to Nichols, Atwood was to follow a short time after with the genuine will—exactly why, I didn't learn."

"I think I see what you mean."

"I mean this: If the genuine will is concealed, we may arrest Benway and be as far as ever from getting the will—in fact, knowing Benway's determined nature as I do, I fear that the will might be forever lost to us."

"You are right to a dot. Go on!"

"Consequently, I would suggest patience. Why not wait until Thursday night; let Benway sell the bogus will to Nichols; and then, just as Atwood is about to deliver the genuine will to Benway, seize both of them?"

Fitch hesitated a moment.

"You forget that we have captured 'Bob,'" he then replied. "When it is known the news will spread like wildfire. Won't it frighten Benway off?"

"Why need it be known? It is now night, and you can take Bob secretly to Jericho. Why not do it, shut him up, and keep mum until you have also nabbed Benway?"

"By George! you have a long head!" Fitch cried.

"Remember that I advise this because the will is now hidden. We don't know where. Let the bider produce it, and then we will nab him and the will, too."

"This matter don't admit of argument," replied the constable. "You have got it all down as fine as silk. Of course we run a slight risk in giving Benway liberty for two days—he may skip out—but I don't believe he will. I'll follow your plan, Jeff, anyhow."

"I think the result will prove satisfactory, Mr. Fitch," Jeff modestly answered.

"Then it's all settled. I'll take our prisoner to Jericho at once. Will you go there with me?"

"Not if I can regain my room at Nichols's unseen. If I skipped out in the night you can rest assured that Nichols is sharp enough to get suspicious. To-morrow, however, I'll announce that I feel better, and go over to Jericho."

"All right, my boy. Of course you'll go with me to Joggle Meadow. And I want to say that you have done some noble work. To you belongs all the credit, and I will see that you get it when my story is told."

"Never mind that, Mr. Fitch; I am not after glory. All I want is to see justice done. And now let us go on."

They did so. Fitch re-entered his carriage and drove on with Bob by his side. Jeff followed on his horse.

When Joggle Meadow was reached Jeff returned his horse to the hotel stable, and, learning that no one but the hostler knew that he had had it, first paid for it and then pledged the man not to mention for two days that he had used it.

The boy then went toward Peter Nichols's. The house was dark and silent, and when he regained his room by the same way he had left it, he had every reason to believe that no one knew of the fact that he had been moving about.

Considerably encouraged by this he sat down in the dark by the window and began a review of the events of the evening. They had been most important, and his heart grew lighter than it had been for many days.

"I think that I am near the accomplishment of my work," he thought gratefully. "I sincerely hope so. I don't like Jericho, and if I can once fulfill my promise to the dead, I will gladly leave here forever."

A sound at the door suddenly attracted his attention.

He turned, and was surprised to see the door open. Peter Nichols's wife appeared, fully dressed, and bearing a lamp in her hand. Jeff was somewhat startled, but she softly closed the door and came toward him with a mild expression on her face.

"You are the boy," she said, in a low voice, "and I wanted to see you."

"Can I help you, Mrs. Nichols?" he asked.

"I want to talk with you; I want to tell you what a strange house you are in."

"Is it strange?"

"It is," the woman answered, with a nod. "This house and those who live in it drove me insane."

"Why, you are not insane."

"Yes, I am; I am cunning enough to know

it. I always knew that I should be. I was here in the midst of secrets, crimes, disgraceful plots and cruelty. I was not so bad as Peter Nichols and his sister, so they tried to keep me ignorant, and what I did know they compelled me to hide through my fears. They ground out my heart and life, and at last I went crazy. It is a blessed relief to be crazy; I don't fear them any more."

Calmly she made this statement—a statement that Jeff knew to be true in one respect, at least. Mrs. Nichols had not been a bad woman; she had been weak, and Peter and Miss Betsey had made her very life a burden.

"And," the woman added, "I don't know that I am now afraid to tell their secrets."

Jeff unclosed his lips to speak, but she went on steadily:

"Secrets! This house is full of them. Secrets that are dark; secrets that are deadly; secrets that gnaw at the vitals like a vampire sucks blood. Such a place as it is was never seen before. Thirty years I've lived here, and never a ray of sunshine. Will there ever be a change? I tell you plainly that it is the hope of my life to one day be free; free to go to funerals, and such places of amusement. How fine it would be! Funerals, young man, are a woman's weak point. Lots of fun I've had at such places."

She nodded her head rapidly, while Jeff gazed at her pityingly. She was honest and well-meaning, and Peter Nichols and his sister had wrecked her life and her reason.

"Would you like to leave here?" Jeff pityingly asked.

"Would I? I should say so. You don't know what it is to stay year after year in a house where secrets abound—dark, deadly, vampire-like secrets. I fancy there are few houses which have more than this one, and I know them all—oh! I know such a lot of secrets!"

She clasped her hands and seemed filled with delight, but suddenly aroused.

"Come with me," she directed, "and I will show you one secret."

"Where are we to go?"

"To the rear room. Come!"

Jeff hesitated. What if the noise of their movements was heard by Peter or Miss Betsey? The danger checked him only a moment. There was nothing to be depended upon when Mrs. Nichols acted, but the possibility that she had a definite idea in her mind aroused his interest.

He decided to follow.

She opened the door again with great caution, and they passed into the hall. All was silent there; all would have been dark except for the light she carried.

She opened another door, and he saw an unfinished room where dust and cobwebs hung on the barren, skeleton-like walls. It was the family store-room for odds and ends, and there was a multitude of them, great and small. Boxes, barrels and other rubbish barred the way.

Mrs. Nichols closed the door and moved toward an old cupboard. She opened the door, and then paused and looked at Jeff.

"It is here," she said; "the secret which has troubled me most. It was a hard thing to do."

Jeff had no words of reply ready.

The women turned again to the cupboard, and, reaching inside, brought out a square, pasteboard box. It was half-full of papers, of which nearly all seemed to be letters. She turned them over rapidly, and then suddenly seized one and held it up.

"The secret is in there," she continued, tapping the envelope with her finger. "They think it is burned, but it isn't; it is hidden here, and I hid it."

"Not a very secure hiding-place," Jeff observed.

A cunning look appeared on the woman's face.

"It is the last place in the world they would think of looking; they never look at these letters. I dared not hide it anywhere else, for if they had found it stowed away in an out-of-the-way place they would have killed me. If they ever find it here they will suspect nothing; they will not know that I tried to save it. Look at it!"

With an abrupt movement she placed it in his hands.

"Look at the record of crime!" she exclaimed. Jeff did not hesitate to avail himself of this chance, and with more than idle curiosity he took the letter and turned it over so that the superscription on the envelope would be visible.

It was addressed to Peter Nichols, but it was something more than this fact which made him start so violently.

The chirography was not new to him.

Every line and curve was very familiar.

From the writing his gaze turned quickly to the postmark, and then he determined, then and there, that the letter should in some way remain in his possession.

He tried to speak, but agitation prevented.

"Don't th nk," resumed Mrs. Nichols, with a stately air, "that because we are poor we have no secrets here. We have—secrets that are dark; secrets that are deadly; secrets that burn the brain and palsy it."

"No doubt," Jeff replied. "As for this matter, may I take it to my room?"

She meditated.

"Yes," she finally replied; "you may take the letter and keep it until I call for it. I have always wished I could confide it to some one; you are just the person. Take it; watch over it; and don't let any one see it."

Breathing a sigh, as though relieved, the de-ranged woman started out of the room. Jeff followed, and with him went the unknown record of the letter.

CHAPTER XVI.

PAXRAVEN'S WILL.

THURSDAY evening had arrived.

A light burned in the kitchen of Peter Nichols's house, but the cheap, shabby curtains were down and no one outside could see what was transpiring inside. Outside, a superficial glance would not have discovered evidence of anything unusual.

Appearances, however, are often deceptive.

From the rear of the house came a man who crept, rather than walked, along the bushes which grew at the west side of the house. Moving thus he came upon another man who was lying behind one group of these bushes.

Neither man seemed surprised, and he on the ground barely looked up.

"Anything new?" asked the creeper.

"No."

"Has the door been opened?"

"No."

"Keep your eyes well open. He may be reconnoitering at some point."

"Let him stare!"

With this peculiar reply the second man hugged the ground still closer, while the creeper crept back toward the rear. Pausing near the corner he looked west. From this point he had a good view of the road, and he watched sharply and patiently.

What was the meaning of his vigil?

In his room Jeff Flicker sat by the open window in such a position that he could see the man by the corner of the house. This man he watched with close attention, as though expecting some sign from him.

Jeff had twice been to Jericho since the events of the previous chapters, but he had not remained. He complained of a pain in his side, and announced his determination not to work for awhile.

Accordingly, he paid Nichols a small sum of money and remained with him; and he showed great interest in the art of farming, asked Nichols many questions about it, and did considerable light work which greatly pleased the old miser.

Work from a paying boarder was something Nichols could appreciate.

The old man was building great hopes on Jeff. The boy was an orphan; if once he could get him in his clutches, he thought that he would have a big chance. Jeff could not expect much pay, and every one near Peter Nichols had to work, and work hard.

Suddenly the man by the corner of the house started back. He came a few steps toward Jeff's window; he waved his hand, and Jeff replied by a similar gesture.

Jeff quickly arose.

"Now for it!" he murmured aloud.

Then he crept to the door of his room and opened it a little very carefully. The hall was dark and still. He had removed his shoes, and he now moved across the hall and down the stairs. While doing so he heard the outer door open and close.

Reaching the position where he had once before acted the listener, he cautiously opened the door a very little. He thus gained view of the kitchen.

Peter and Miss Betsey were there, and with them was—Benway.

The graduate of the "School of Knavery" had never been calmer or more at his ease; if he had been among his dearest friends his smile would not have been more pleasant and frank.

On the other hand, Peter looked at the visitor sharply, surlily, hostilely and venomously; while Miss Betsey sat as stiff and stern as a marble statue, and regarded Benway much as though

he were a pickle and she a bottle of vinegar which yearned to swallow him.

"A pleasant evening; a most charming evening," said Mr. Benway, blandly, smiling upon Miss Betsey. "The air is deliciously balmy, and the katydids are singing as though they were practicing a carol."

"Hang the katydids!" surlily broke in Nichols. "Let's get to business."

"In a moment. Miss Nichols, I couldn't help noticing, as I came in, what a fine place you have in that deep window for hanging flowers. A few choice plants properly suspended—"

"Sir," interrupted Miss Betsey, her voice taking on the note of a saw beset by a file, "when I put any flowers in that 'ere window I won't ask your advice, an' I won't have any flowers there, anyhow!"

"Come ter business; come ter business!" growled Peter. "Have you brought Pax-raven's will?"

"Yes, Mr. Nichols—"

"Then show it!"

"Charmed, I'm sure!"

Nothing could banish Benway's smile, and his manner remained as bland as ever under these curt remarks of his companions. He knew that he was torturing their sordid natures, and delighted in doing it. Calmly he laid a folded paper upon the table.

"Paxraven's will," he said, nonchalantly.

Nichols grasped the paper. His eyes seemed to burn as he looked, and Miss Betsey hung over his shoulder eagerly. The paper at last lay spread out before them which looked like the coveted document, and the miserable wretches thought of nothing else.

Benway watched with a scornful smile. He was glad then for the sake of decency that the will he hoped to sell them was bogus. Villain that he was, he lacked the meanness of that evil pair.

They devoured it with their glances, first reading it through to make sure of its terms, and then subjecting it to a different examination. Benway smiled; they were trying to make sure that it was genuine, and he defied their powers of penetration.

It was soon over. Survey it as they would they could see nothing wrong, and their last suspicion soon vanished; they believed the will genuine. This point seemingly settled, the next thing was to pay over the money. The miserable pair were well worth seeing then.

As old Peter drew out his bank-notes his hands shook until the bills rattled loudly, being fresh from a bank, and his mean, selfish face seemed to contract, wither, and grow gray. Miss Betsey sat bolt upright, her face the image of stony despair, her gaze fixed upon Benway's smiling countenance as though she would gladly strike him dead with the power of that gaze.

Not a word did she speak, however, until Benway had counted the money and stowed it away in his pocket.

Then she did speak.

"I suppose you think," she said, venomously, "that you hev done a big thing. You ought ter be proud on't; it is a fine thing ter rob the old an' helpless. If there is sech a thing as jedgment, I guess you'll git your share on't."

"Thank you, Miss Nichols; I am glad to get your opinion," answered Benway, bowing and smiling as blandly as though he had received a high compliment. "I was always partial to the ladies, and I have a sincere admiration for you. I take it you are as brainy as you are witty and handsome. And now I must go, much as I hate to tear myself away. Let me advise you, dear Miss Betsey, to put some hanging flower-pots in the big window; you will find them charming, and—"

"Go!" gasped Miss Betsey, almost stifled with rage. "Go, an' never let me see you ag'in!"

"The best of friends must part. Tra-la-la!"

With this airy farewell he turned and left the house. Two great tears rolled down Peter Nichols's face, and his sister's eyes blazed fiercely. How big—how very big that three thousand dollars looked then!

"We are ruined!" moaned the miser.

"Yes," replied Miss Betsey, in a hard voice, "but we have this, an' it shall never turn ag'in us!"

She lifted the bogus will and thrust it toward the blaze of the old-fashioned candle which stood on the table, but before the fire could seize upon it something else did.

A human hand glided past her arm and grasped the coveted document, snatching it from her hold.

She recoiled, while Peter sprung to his feet in an agony of terror.

Jeff Flicker stood before them, holding the

bogus will in his hand, his young face stern and menacing.

One moment Nichols was dumfounded, but color then came to his face with a swift rush.

"You young hound!" he cried, springing forward, "give me that paper or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST ACT IN THE BATTLE.

"PETER NICHOLS, you are my prisoner!"

The old miser had not reached Jeff Flicker; a strong hand seized and drew him back, and the above-recorded ominous words were deeply spoken in his ears.

He turned and saw Fitch, the constable.

"Your jig is up, old man!" the officer announced. "You have had quite a run of luck, but you have come to the end of your rope."

Miss Betsey sprung to her feet.

"That paper!" she shrilly cried. "It is mine; give it here, boy!"

"Keep off!" ordered the constable. "Hold the paper, Jeff."

"I will, sir."

"But it's mine—"

"It belongs to law," Fitch declared. "Even if you had it—even if you had burned it, as you tried to do—it would have availed you nothing. It is not Paxraven's will. Your late visitor victimized you; he passed over a forged will; yet the genuine one still exists. In brief you have paid three thousand dollars for a paper not worth a straw!"

Nichols uttered a loud cry, but attention was then drawn to Miss Betsey. She fell backward into a chair, and then, before a man could touch or save her, rolled to the floor in convulsions. The knowledge of the swindle practiced upon them had dealt her a blow which might prove fatal.

In the mean while Benway had left the house and turned toward the covered bridge. There was not a sign of danger to meet even his sharp eyes, and now that he had sold the bogus will and got his money he felt much safer.

Believing that no one had connected him with the robbery of the post-office, directly or indirectly, he felt safe to go and come freely. The failure of "Bob" to appear at Atwood's had caused him lazy surprise, but not a rumor of Bob's capture reached his ears.

Reaching the bridge he sat down and began to hum a song in a careless vein, but stopped as a man came down the road ten minutes later. He advanced; it proved to be Atwood.

"Here I am," announced Benway. "All right?"

"Yes."

"Got the will?"

"Yes."

"Give it me, and I'll make the next move."

Atwood extended the paper, but Benway's hand never touched it again. A light figure flitted from the corner of the bridge, a hand which was not Benway's snatched the will away; and Paxraven's money bade fair to go right at last.

Jeff Flicker held the will!

A fierce, startled exclamation burst from Benway, usually so cool, but his day was past. Fitch was there with his men; they surrounded the plotters and fought them to a standstill; and in a few minutes both Benway and Atwood were prisoners.

They were led toward the hotel.

By the time that the place was reached Benway had recovered his coolness, and when they entered a private room and Fitch handed him a chair he thanked the officer politely, smiled genially, and then gave his chief captor a cigar.

All this without hope of helping himself; it was a part of his cool nature, and he meant to uphold the dignity of the "School of Knavery."

Fitch showed him the genuine and bogus wills.

"Now, my man," said the constable, "you will do yourself no harm, and you may help yourself a good bit, if you will tell all about this affair."

"Why, of course I'll do it," replied Benway, cheerfully. "You see, Pete Nichols knew that there was a genuine will which gave the property once belonging to Paxraven to little Sadie Pickett; and he finally learned that said will had in all probability drifted West in an old box to one Clifford Searles, an ex-Eastern man. Nichols got Markin & Toohey, lawyers, of Chicago, to look it up. They did so, and sent it East.

"Before it was sent I got wind of the game, and being anxious to turn an honest penny, I came

East and engaged two burglars to rob the Jericho post-office. By a forged telegram we got the letter there one day ahead of Nichols's expectations. That's all I know, except that I forged a will and sold to Pete, and that if you had let me alone I would soon have got the real will into its real owner's hands. She is Sadie Pickett. I would have done this because of my love of justice—and hard cash!"

Benway laughed merrily, and blew an immaculate wreath of smoke upward, daintily holding his cigar in his fingers as he did so.

"This will has had an odd experience," said Fitch, thoughtfully. "Old Mr. Paxraven but two near relatives; Peter Nichols and little Sadie Pickett. Nichols was his heir-at-law, but Paxraven had Sadie living with him, and he left her all his property by this will.

"It was known that the will had been made, but it could not be found when Paxraven died. The property went to Nichols, who also took Sadie. It was not an act of benevolence; he has made a mere slave of the child, and she has been abused by both him and Miss Betsey.

"I am now able to say what became of the will when Paxraven lay dying. It was stolen at Peter Nichols's request. He hired a man named David Orriston to do it. The latter was a man who was the victim of drink, by means of which his moral nature had been dwarfed and blunted.

"He stole the will, was paid for it by Nichols, and then, oddly enough, remorse overtook him. He seized a chance and thrust the will into a box filled with old books and papers.

"There the matter rested for a few years. Orriston supposed that Nichols took the old box when Paxraven's effects were disposed of. Really, Nichols, not having any interest in the books and papers, shipped the box to Clifford Searles, another distant relative of Paxraven's, generously stating that it was Searles's share of the estate.

"A few months ago a rumor reached Nichols that the will, for the disappearance of which he had never been able to account, was in the old box. He communicated with Markin & Toohey, the lawyers. Searles, on receiving the old box, had been angry at receiving such a 'legacy,' and had placed it in his attic without examination. Thus Markin & Toohey, by buying the old books, box and all, in a sly way, got the will.

"The said will is now where it will not be lost again, and Sadie Pickett will at last have what Paxraven wished her to have—his whole property. I am an officer, and have done my best in the case, but I am free to say that the credit belongs, not to me, but to one other here present."

And he placed his hand upon Jeff Flicker's shoulder.

"Whatever I have done," Jeff quickly replied, "has been a sacred duty. I have something to tell which even you don't suspect, Mr. Fitch. You know that 'Jeff Flicker' is only a light name given me when I came to Jericho. The name I gave here was Wilson. My real name is Ralph Orriston, and I am a nephew of that unhappy David Orriston who stole the will for Nichols.

"I will not comment on my uncle's course more than to say that when his death drew near he repented most sincerely, and, believing that Nichols had the box of old books, he made me promise to come here and see if I could get the will. Knowing that Nichols was not given to reading, he hoped that the will had remained undiscovered in the box.

"When I came here I was afraid that Nichols would recognize me if I went direct to his house, and I first went to work in Payson's livery stable, intending to seize the first chance to enter Nichols's house.

"You know the rest, and now that the will is recovered my duty to my unfortunate uncle is done."

"And well done, too," declared Fitch.

"Excellently well done," agreed Benway, airily. "Young Jeff, you are a good one; you really ought to join the School of Knavery."

"I am content with catching its graduates," retorted Jeff, quickly.

The story is nearly told; it only remains to notice the changes of the seven years that have ensued since Jeff Flicker's triumph.

The end of Peter Nichols and Miss Betsey was worthy of their miserable lives. The woman had a series of convulsions and died, while old Peter, before he could be brought to trial, grew so weak-minded that he was put in an asylum, where he died. The loss of Paxraven's fortune was, really, the death-blow of both.

Greatly to Fitch's chagrin, Benway escaped the law through one of the law's quibbles, and then Benway abruptly left for the West again.

"Bob" and his accomplice in the post-office robbery were sent to prison.

Little Sadie Pickett, thanks to Paxraven's money and a good guardian, grew up to be a fine girl, and the other day she was happily married. To whom?

It need scarcely be said that the "happy man" was Jeff Flicker. Her gratitude was only exceeded by her admiration of him, and in becoming his wife she united her fortunes with those of a man bound to make an honorable record in social and business life.

THE END.

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